

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Changing Without Staying the Same”**

**Isaiah 12:2 – 6
Luke 3:7 – 18**

Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2015

“The more things change... the more they stay the same!”

We’ve all heard that old saying, right? And probably used it ourselves more times than we can remember... “*The more things change, the more they stay the same.*” And what we mean when we say “*the more things change, the more they stay the same*” is that, while something might look very different outside, externally, on the *surface* of things... on the *inside*, at the *heart* of the matter, everything is still pretty much as it always was. It’s business as usual, par for the course, the “same old same old” of the status quo. “*The more things change... the more they stay the same.*”

Of course, we often use this saying with regard to politics... after new people, or a new party, or representatives of some new movement are voted into office; and then we’re subjected to the same old divisiveness, or partisanship, or cronyism as the old regime. We sports fans often say it... after our team gets a new coach, or makes the number one college draft pick, or spends a gazillion dollars on free agent players, all of which is supposed to turn the team into a winner; and then they go out and lose all the time anyway, just like they always did. (Cleveland Browns fans, especially, find themselves making this lament, pretty much every year!)

We say it when some popular product is redesigned to eliminate some bug that sometimes caused it to malfunction; only to find that the newly designed product now fouls up in some completely different way. And over the past 375 years, this church has changed pastors thirty times... and I’ll bet that after every single change, somebody said, “His sermons are still too long!”

We like to say that “change is difficult,” or that “people don’t like change.” And the truth of those observations is attested to by the existence of a phrase like “*the more things change... the more they stay the same.*”

Now, I mention this fundamental truth about the challenge and difficulty of making meaningful changes... because our lesson this morning from the gospel of Luke is all about *change*; and, in particular, the necessity of change when one comes into contact with the kingdom of God.

As you may recall from our sermon last Sunday, which covered the first section of Luke chapter three, John the Baptist had come marching out of the Judean desert in order to announce to everyone that the Lord was coming; that the King was coming; and not just any king, not a human king, but the Almighty King of heaven. John was proclaiming that, with the beginning of Jesus’ messianic ministry, the kingdom of Almighty God was about to be founded right in the middle of our weary world... in a way not previously known or experienced; and now John was

acting as a kind of “signpost,” encouraging people to make themselves ready, so they could fully experience this awesome kingdom which was breaking out all around them.

According to John, to be in the presence of Jesus... is to be in the presence of the reign and rule of Jesus’ Father, who is God Almighty... and to be in the presence of Almighty God is to be situated right smack in the middle of God’s kingdom.

“The kingdom of God is now at hand!” John said. *“Prepare yourselves to receive it! Make your hearts and souls ready to welcome it! Put yourselves in the right spiritual condition, so you can be a part of it!”* With this pronouncement, John is saying that Jesus’ ministry is beginning; and because it is, God’s kingdom is pretty much in our face; so we’d better prepare ourselves, make ourselves ready, to receive it. Make sense?

And in our lesson for this morning, John tells us one of the key ways in which we **do** that work of preparation and making ourselves ready... and that is by **changing ourselves** in some pretty important and fundamental ways. Let’s look again at our text, and what John has to say about the need for change in the presence of God’s rule and kingdom. After telling everyone that they need to be prepared, John says:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.” Okay, so here John is chastising the people who thought that they could just be baptized, receive forgiveness, and then go on their merry way. To those people, John says “uh-uh... not so fast!”

“You are nothing but a bunch of snakes!” he says, *“if you think that you can just go through the motions of taking a dip in the river, and then walk away like all is well! If you really want things to be well, then let’s see some change! Let’s see some repentance! Let’s see you set aside some of your sin... and practice a little more godliness!”*

And, apparently there must have been some people there that day who, in their self-defense, were saying something along the lines of, *“Hey, we’re Jews! We’re children of father Abraham! We’re already in good shape... because we’re part of the Chosen People! So we don’t need to change!”* Well, to them John said, *“Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’”* That is, don’t think that your Jewish lineage is going to save your bacon, if the life you’re living isn’t fit for God’s kingdom.

“For I tell you,” John continued, *“that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.”* In other words, you’re not as special as you think you are! If you’re planning to hide your unjust and corrupt life behind your nationality, you’re in for a rude awakening; because even a rock can be a child of God, if God desires it. So, your genetics do you no good at all. Even if you’re a direct-line descendent of Abraham, you still need to change... to repent... to demonstrate a kind of life that’s fit for the kingdom of God. There’s simply no place to hide from the responsibility to do something tangible, and meaningful, to make yourselves more fit for life in the presence of the Lord.

Okay, so by now, John’s made it clear that the coming kingdom of God requires that everyone change... if they want to be part of it. And that requirement is extended even to Jewish people... who might have thought that they’d get a pass because of their lineage to the historic patriarchs of the Jewish faith. That being case, what’s a person to do? Well, continuing with our text, we find that John gives his audience a few concrete examples.

Luke tells us that the crowd asked John, “*What should we do then?*” To which John answered: “*The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.*” In other words, if you’re being stingy, greedy, or consumed by self-concern, cut it out... and pay more attention to the poor and needy.

Luke goes on: “*Tax collectors also came to be baptized. ‘Teacher,’ they asked, ‘what should we do?’*” To which John responded: “*Don’t take any more than you are required to.*” In other words, if you’re being dishonest and untrustworthy, knock it off... be honest, and virtuous, and worthy of the trust of others.

Luke continues: “*Then some soldiers asked him, ‘and what should we do?’*” To which John replied: “*Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.*” In other words, don’t use your position of power and authority to take advantage of people; be content with your situation, and don’t be oppressive or abusive.

And then John goes on to reiterate the fact that the messianic king is on His way; and that this particular king is so great that John isn’t even worthy to perform the slave’s duty of kneeling down and unfastening His sandals. So get with it; take stock of the character of your life; and make some necessary changes so that you’ll be **ready** for the kingdom that’s coming!

Now, obviously John could have listed many other species of conduct and behavior that would be considered change-worthy in the life of a Christian disciple; and maybe he did, and maybe Luke just chose the three examples that appear in the text as a representative sample of what John was challenging his listeners to do.

The point is that, when we’re in the presence of God, and God’s kingdom, and God’s representative of that kingdom... His own Son, Jesus; we **cannot** remain as we were before! When Jesus Christ takes us by the hand and says, “Follow me!” we **cannot** drag along behind us all the sin, and foolishness, and self-centeredness that so often plague us in our daily life... somehow or other, we have to let at least **some** of the bad stuff **go!** When we make the decision to live as God’s people, we **cannot** cling to attitudes, and prejudices, and judgmentalism that God Himself has called for us to set aside... we have to approach our life as God’s people with open hearts, and open minds, and an open willingness to follow wherever, and however, He leads us.

Now, make no mistake: I am **not** talking about earning God’s favor, or working our way into heaven. I am **not** saying that, unless we **do** A, B, and C... and **stop doing** X, Y, and Z... God won’t love us, and God won’t care about us. I do **not** mean that the life of Christian faith is just another form of Pharisaic self-righteousness... in which we thump our chests and say, “Look how good **I’m** doing as a Christian!” No, we’re all sinners in need of God’s forgiveness; and we all take our stand on God’s grace and mercy; and God loves each of us unconditionally, no matter who or what we are.

I’m simply saying that, if we’re serious about living a life of real, honest to goodness, soul-satisfying Christian discipleship... we must also be equally serious about making some personal changes, in our behavior, in our thinking, in our attitude; which will make us more fit for life in God’s kingdom. If Jesus Christ has us by the heart and soul... we can’t remain as we were. It’s just that simple.

The question of the day for all of us is, where do we need to change? How do we need to repent? What is it about you, and me, that needs to be subjected to the regenerative power of the God we love and serve? We all have areas in our life where we know, and I mean, where we **really**

know... that we need to change. What are we going to do about it? How are we going to deal with it?

My need for repentance is different than your need... my changes are not necessarily going to be your changes. But whatever it is, it's there... just waiting for us to take it out of the box and pay attention to it. At the end of the day, that's what John the Baptist was saying to the people who'd come out to him for baptism that day, so many years ago. And that's all that John is saying to us, too. Come along and follow Jesus... but as we do so, leave behind some of the crud that doesn't fit.

And here's the best news of all: when we make the kind of changes that John was talking about... **nothing** stays the same! Oh, we may still struggle and have our ups and downs; and our changes may feel like "three steps forward, and two steps back." And we may have days where we feel like we're still in the same old rut.

But in our heart, and in our soul, something is fundamentally different... and will never be the same again. Because the King; our Messiah; the Lord Jesus Christ is on the case. And if we'll only let Him, He'll keep us moving in the right direction... one day at a time, one step at a time.

Changing without staying the same. That's what we're shooting for, as faithful disciples of Jesus. May we make progress in that quest; today, tomorrow, and all the days of our lives.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!