



“Follow Through”
Scripture – Luke 3:15-22
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, January 13, 2019

Who has ever made a New Year’s resolution? Did anyone make any resolutions for 2019? Is anyone willing to share one of your resolutions with us? How many of you have ever resolved to do more physical exercise?

Most of the time when I go to the “Y” in the evening, there’s no problem getting a treadmill – except for January and February. The first two months of the year there are waiting lines, but from March through the end of the year, take your pick of the open treadmills. The determination has slipped and the resolutions have faded.

I read that one man writes down his resolutions in January and at the top of the page he writes: “Goals.” Then, he makes a second list. On the top of the second page, he writes: “Regrets.” He writes down the regrets he has from both the previous year and the distant past.

All of us have regrets. I suspect there is at least one person sitting here who regrets the career she chose. Someone probably wishes he had been more involved in his children’s lives when they were young. I suspect several of us are saying, “I should have listened more to my parents.” Maybe you wish you had waited longer before you got married or wish you had spoken up when someone told a racist joke.

All of us have regrets, but we need to be careful about giving them too much power because they can spark a downward spiral. They can feed the notion that life would have been far better had we not made that poor decision. Hammering ourselves with our regrets can put us into a dark place and propel us to believe that our life is far worse than it is.

Should we attempt to erase our regrets from our minds? There is certainly no value in simply berating ourselves over a past mistake. However, there *is* value in learning from our mistakes. A previous blunder can depress us, but it can also motivate us to adopt a different approach next time. Regrets usually prompt feelings of guilt, but why not focus on their positive value? Why not think of a regret as a “catalyst for course correction?”¹

That could be a fitting title for John the Baptist. Luke portrays him as a fiery, no-nonsense prophet without constraints on his tongue. A few verses prior to today’s reading, John greets the crowd who came to hear him with these warm words of affection: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” How is that as a catalyst for course correction?

As we move into today's passage, John tells those who have come to hear him preach that the Messiah is coming and "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Clearly, the art of nuance completely escaped John the Baptist. He seemed only to understand stark divisions. Either you are right with God or you are wrong with God. And as John's threat is searing our conscience, the gospel writer follows with this stunning assessment: "So, with many other exhortations, (John) proclaimed the *good news* to the people."

Good news? It seems more fitting for the gospel writer to say, "So, with many other exhortations, John scared the pants off people!" John the Baptist was as subtle as a drill sergeant. I had a football coach who I am certain graduated from the "John the Baptist School of Provocation." I resented his methods, but I confess that on the football field, he was a catalyst for course correction.

Why did Luke say that John's abrasive speech about the saved and the damned was actually *good* news? A couple of reasons. First, John was announcing to all who came out to hear him that they did not have to continue treading the path that was destroying their souls. There was time for a course correction. They could wade into the Jordan and allow John to baptize them, which marked a new beginning, a turning point. They could cut the cord with the regrets they had been dragging along behind them for years. They could be forgiven for past blunders and cleansed of their guilt, so that they could embark on a new path with a Messiah who would show them the better way.

While *we* might hear John's words as condemnation, the people who came out to hear him heard his message as one of hope. Our passage begins: "The people were filled with expectation, and all were wondering if John might be the Messiah." So, their hopes were rising. John told them that he was not the one they were awaiting, but one who was more powerful was coming soon and he would baptize them with God's Spirit.

The second reason John's words were good news is that John was not only speaking to those who had come to the Jordan. His words were addressed primarily to people in power – the political powers and the religious authorities who colluded with the Roman occupiers to maintain the status quo.

John was born into the priestly class and he could have remained among the religious elites in Jerusalem. However, he rejected the priestly mantle, and instead heard his calling to become a prophet – a harsh critic of those in power who were complicit with the Romans in keeping the vast majority in poverty.

John rejected the Holy City for the countryside; he spurned the ornate priestly robe for animal skins. The mention that he ate locusts and wild honey was not because he was pushing a gluten free diet. It indicates that he ate what the poor ate.² He identified with those outside the halls of power, and what made him a hero of the people was that he courageously spoke truth to power. John was an especially harsh critic of Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. He spoke out against Herod's corruption and immorality, which eventually led to John's demise. But he was determined to do what was right regardless of the personal cost.

Of course, Jesus trod a similar path. His obedience to God led him into constant confrontations with the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees. And after he challenged the temple authorities and his followers paraded into town shouting that he was the next King David, both the religious and political authorities moved to silence him. But, like his cousin John, Jesus was fearless in confronting corruption.

When we are baptized, it signals that God claims us as a beloved son or daughter. This is the deepest truth about who we are. Yet, our baptism signals not only that we are *claimed* by God, it also signals that we are *commissioned* by God. We are called to a new way of living. We are called to pattern our life after the life of Jesus – a life intent on loving others and a life brave enough to do what is right and true and good.

Over the past year, I have been awed by the courage of a number of journalists around the world who have put their lives in danger by reporting the truth. Freedom of the press is essential for democracy. Dictators know that if they can control the message, they can control the people.

In Myanmar, the military is engaged in a violent campaign to rid the country of its Rohingya population. Two young journalists who exposed a mass execution by the military were arrested and they will spend years in jail. In India, the world's largest democracy, two journalists were killed in separate hit-and-run attacks within the span of 24 hours. Closer to home, remember what happened in the newsroom of the Annapolis newspaper last June? Five journalists were murdered by a man who was upset with their reporting. CNN has had to evacuate its offices in New York twice after bomb threats. And Jamal Khashoggi, a reporter from Saudi Arabia who criticized the Saudi Crown Prince was brutally murdered in the consulate in Istanbul.³ These journalists showed amazing courage in standing up against powers of darkness.

At baptism, we are **claimed** by God and we are **commissioned** by God to live a Christ-like life – a life that generously extends compassion to others, doggedly strives for justice, and persistently works for the common good. There are times when that becomes a boulder strewn road to walk because of counter forces seeking to intimidate and to silence. Following Jesus is not for the weak in spirit, but for those who are bravely determined to follow through on their commitment.

When fear filets your backbone
and jitters strangle your nerve,
your daring turns timid
and your resolve staggers.

When dread ransacks your fortitude
and your tenacity nosedives,
your foundation turns to sand
and radiance drains from your heart.

At such times, remember trials you have endured
and darkness you have vanquished.
Recall the battles you have fought
and the suffering you have conquered.

Be assured you are not alone
when you encounter your giant.
The One who was and is and is to come
is as near to you as your breath.

So dip into your soul where your courage dwells
and summon the toughness that is awaiting your command.
Focus like a laser on your adversary
and the glint in your eyes will return.

NOTES

1. Don McMinn, "List Your Regrets," January 8, 2018.
2. Marcia mount Shoop, "Core Story," December 4, 2016.
3. Edward Felsenthal, "The Choice," *Time*, December 24/31, p.44-4

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

In the beginning you spoke to chaos, O God of life. Your Spirit danced across the waters and creation dawned. In days of new beginning, you spoke to crowds gathered at the Jordan. As water washed over your Son and the Spirit descended as a dove, your voice burst forth from heaven. You still speak, sometimes in a thundering cry, sometimes in a gentle whisper. Speak to us this day.

Speak your healing Word to all in need of comfort and hope. We lift before you those who are grieving, those who are lonely, those who are sick. Speak into the lives of those who need work and those who need rest; those who live under the threat of violence, and those who face this day with fear or uncertainty.

In times that can feel chaotic, we pray for our nation and for those most affected by the government shut down. Open the hearts of our elected leaders to the needs of all, and open their ears to hear your voice. Let your wisdom guide them toward a way forward, and grant them the courage to work together for the common good.

Speak, Lord, into all our lives and call us again to your service. We are your people – those you have claimed in the waters of baptism and anointed with your Spirit. Wash us again with your grace and send us into your world, that we might participate in Christ's work. Bless, we pray, all who seek to follow you by working for justice and reconciliation and peace, in this community and around the world.

We pray these and all things in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever. Amen.**