

## ***"Taking Stock of our Lives!"***

***Luke 3:1-8  
December 27, 2009***

***John 3:1-8  
St. James UCC***

***Preached by Rev. Robert Matlack***

---

---

Here we are, the 27<sup>th</sup> of December, two days after Christmas. I usually find myself feeling sort of mellow this time of year. We have celebrated Christ's birth with all of the joy and excitement that goes along with Christmas. We look ahead to a short work week and then another holiday as we celebrate the coming of the New Year. This is a time when typically we can relax a little bit after the hecticness of preparing for Christmas. Many people are away visiting with family. For most people this is a special time of year, not only because of all the special celebrations, and the family gatherings, but also because the pace changes. We slow down. We relax. We have an opportunity to enjoy being alive.

With the coming of the New Year also comes the tradition of taking stock of our lives. For many people that takes the form of New Year's Resolutions. But I want to suggest to you today that this process of self-examination is too important a process to be done by quickly writing down a few resolutions that we only keep for a day or a week or even a month. Rather, the Christian faith has always lifted up the value of genuine soul-searching, of taking a good honest look at our lives - what's right with them, and what's wrong with them, with the focus being where we stand in our relationship with God.

Another way of thinking about that might be to say that we have celebrated Christmas, we have celebrated the birth of God's love in our lives, yet now we need to take a good hard look at ourselves and ask, what is different? And what ought to be different still? You see, we cannot remain unchanged in the face of God's love for us, so in what ways have we already been changed by that love, and how do we still need to change or open ourselves further that we might be changed?

That was the message brought by John the Baptist, who came to prepare the way for Christ. "Turn away from your sins and be baptized", he said. You see John understood that you cannot greet the Christ and remain unchanged by this special encounter with God. It is not an indifferent experience. Rather a true encounter with Christ causes us to turn away from our sins and turn towards God.

John was calling people to examine their lives, to really take a look at those things that they needed to change, and in seeing those places where their lives fell short, to repent. He sought to awaken in people a genuine desire to change, to seek God's forgiveness for the wrongs that they had done, and to ask God's help that the needed changes might indeed take place. John's point was that this kind of encounter with God is a process that leads to salvation.

Our lives are not meant to be rigid. We weren't created as people who are meant to go through life unchanged and unchanging. Rather, life is meant to be a continual process of growth and change. We are to live and then to learn from that living. We are called to

times of self-examination that we might look at our lives in the light of what we have learned, and be changed by that experience.

It is very appropriate to ask ourselves, how has my faith grown in the last few months? Or the last year? What have I learned? Where have I encountered God? How ought my life to be different as a result of these faith experiences? What do I believe that God wants for me and from me? When we take seriously these kinds of questions, then we are indeed doing what John the Baptist called, “preparing the way of the Lord”.

That process of change and repentance is often not an easy process. It takes a lot of honesty and a willingness to take a look at the areas of our lives that perhaps we’d rather keep hidden, even from ourselves. It requires a willingness to confront our own inadequacies and our own weaknesses. It requires most of all the gift of faith. We need to know that God is with us in that process, that God does not condemn us for our wrongs, but rather encourages us to honestly look at our lives, to see our mistakes, and then to change. One of the most beautiful gifts that we have received is that we don’t have to be enslaved by our past. We don’t have to make the same mistakes over and over again. We can change! We can be changed by the power of God’s love for us!

In fact, Jesus talks about the necessity for that kind of change in his conversation with Nicodemus. Jesus says, “no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again”. It’s hard to think of a more radical change in life than birth. One moment you’re safe in your mother’s womb. Everything you need is provided there, and then you are thrust out into the world to survive on your own. Jesus calls us to be born again, to be born by the Spirit.

Now as you know there are Christian groups in our society that define that as a once in a lifetime experience, just as our original birth was, but I think that that is different than what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus is talking about a complete reorientation of our lives so that we are guided by God. That is in a very real sense a continual process, not something that happens once and then we’re done with it.

For example, when we were confirmed or baptized or joined this congregation that is the commitment that we made. Essentially at each of those times we committed ourselves - or if we were baptized as an infant, our parents committed us - to be guided by God. We lifted up our faith and declared that it would be our guide. But we know that that declaration of faith was only the beginning.

Yes, it’s tempting to think that after one of those special moments that then we can lean back and rest, that the main job has been done. But, the reality is that that commitment is only the beginning. The kind of rebirth that we’re committing ourselves to needs to take place each and every day of our lives. The job is far from done, in fact it has only just begun.

Jesus is calling us to lives of growth and change in which every day of our lives we find ourselves reborn in the Spirit. For each day is a new opportunity. Each day is a new challenge. Each day is a gift. It is a new day which holds the opportunity for us to grow, to experience God more fully and to serve God more faithfully. God knows that this is a lifelong task, and even as we approach the end of 80 or 90 or 100 years of growing in the faith, we will not be finished.

It is a challenge big enough so that we need never be bored. We need never feel like there is nothing more for us to do. It is a challenge that would be too big for any of us, if we were to try it alone. But with the help and support of each other, and most of all with the support of God's love, nothing is impossible.

One of the wondrous and hope-filled aspects of God's love for us is that we can change, we can grow, we can become more fully the people that God created us to be. We are not enslaved by the past, forever bound to the mistakes of yesterday, for God frees us to live today as a new day, a day which is only limited by our readiness to experience and respond to God's love for us.

Susan DeVore Williams says it very well in her poem, "I Thank You, Lord".

I thank you, Lord,  
For the unstained page  
That is the new Year:  
A fresh, clean sheet to replace  
The one I've scribbled on so long

O thank you that this year is not  
Simply a recycled remnant  
Of all that has gone before;  
It is a new world  
Awaiting this explorer's feet.

This year-this year! - I am alive,  
And all your promises are true.  
Nothing is beyond your means, Lord,  
And nothing is impossible with you.

Amen.