

A Home for All

In 1976, members of this church, Central United Methodist Church, saw that people in our community needed food. Responding to this basic need, church members began offering a bag lunch to anyone who came to their door twice a week, on Monday's and Thursdays.

This was the cornerstone of the NOAH Project. In 1999, realizing that people needed more than just a lunch, Central partnered with Family Service, Inc. and created the NOAH project, NOAH standing for Networking, Organizing, and Advocating for the Homeless. NOAH began offering social services and physical health counseling.

In 2003, NOAH was transferred to the Central United Methodist Church of Detroit Community Development Corporation, our 501 (c) 3. In 2014, my first year here, it was one of the coldest and snowiest winter in Detroit's history. NOAH created a community Center on the second floor, where their hours of operation were extended. Now NOAH has expanded its Bag Lunch Program to serve lunch four days a week.

Now I have worked with different agencies dealing with the issues of homelessness. I worked with SOS, South Oakland Solutions in Oakland County and MCREST, Macomb County Rotating Emergency Shelter Team, in Macomb County. And I have volunteered with NOAH before becoming the pastor here at Central.

NOAH does their work the best. While they are not a shelter, they work toward the day when they don't need to exist anymore.. But they are the central hub for services, resources and relationships as we journey alongside individuals on the path to stable housing.

On NOAH's website it says that they fulfill this mission be welcoming everyone with warm hospitality, they practice radical acceptance that builds trusting relationships. They remain persistent and consistent throughout the journey. They treat all clients, volunteers, staff and partners with respect and dignity. They strive for diversity, equity and inclusion in all that they do. And they engage the community in our commitment to social change.

Their main goal, their vision is to be an anchor of hope leading the Detroit community in ending homelessness. And they are housed right here in our church. You might say that they listened to John the Baptist in his call for justice in our world.

What part does John the Baptist actually play in the Christmas Story? What good news does he bring? I mean, think about it, how many Christmas pageants have you gone to where you have seen John the Baptist as a central character? How many Christmas cards have you seen depicting him prophesying in the wilderness, "Prepare the Way of the Lord?"

Can't you just see it? A beautiful hallmark card with a stack of Christmas trees on the front piled up in a big bonfire. Inside the message reads, "Seasons greetings! Even now the axe also lies at the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that doesn't bring forth good fruit is cut down, and thrown into the fire. From our house to yours, Merry Christmas.

All the gospels agree, though. John is the forerunner of Jesus who told everyone about the Messiah who was to come. He's a central character in the Christmas story. He told people Jesus was coming in judgment and they asked, "What shall we do?"

In her commentary on our scripture for today, Elder Vilmarie Cintron – Olivieri says that though John the Baptist words might sound harsh, it is a message of good news – of change, forgiveness and justice – to a suffering people. God called John for a specific place and time and his cry from the wilderness, as written in Isaiah, proclaimed leveled valleys and righted wrongs. This was, and is, a message of joy, especially for those who had lost hope, hurt by the inequities and injustices perpetrated by the empire and the religious authorities aligned with it. The world as they knew it was about to be changed.

Crowds came to John to be baptized, and he charged them with “bearing fruit worthy of repentance”, not relying on past glories, heritage or lineage, but producing their own fruit, living and acting in ways that demonstrated true change. Resting on their laurels for far too long, the crowd wasn’t quite sure how to do that, and John offers words of wisdom.

Instead of accumulating, share with others what you have. Instead of being indifferent or selfish, show consideration and compassion. Instead of taking advantage and preying on the vulnerable, be satisfied with what you have and treat others fairly and with dignity.

What then shall we do? We know that question all too well. It’s the question we ask when life is complicated and difficult and the world has gone mad. Tell me what to do? Give me an answer. I think the question points to and reveals our sense of powerlessness. When I hear that question, when I ask myself that question, I hear us saying that we’ve come up against something bigger than ourselves. We are scared and overwhelmed. Life is out of control. We feel helpless to fix the situation.

Here’s why I say that. Most of the time we know what to do. Every day we make hundreds of decisions, big ones, little ones, important ones, unimportant ones, life changing ones, some with lasting consequences, and others with temporary effect.

Think about all the decisions you have made from the time you got up this morning to this moment. You knew what to do. I’m not saying we always get it right but that we generally know what to do. But when our world gets turned upside down, when life feels like more than we can handle, when we feel powerless, that’s when we cry out, “what then should be do?”

If that question comes from a deep place within, then our response must also come from that same deep place. Our response to that question must begin not with what is happening around us but what is happening within us. It must begin with our sense of powerlessness. If we focus only on what is happening in the world around us, our response is basically limited to fight or flight, neither of which are fruits worthy of repentance.

On the one hand our words and actions take on a violent tone. We stereotype, blame and act against all Muslims, all refugees, all poor people, all NRA members, all police officers, all democrats, all republicans. When we do that we become just a bit more like the evildoers against whom we are fighting.

On the other hand we can become silent and passive. We deny any responsibility and declare it to be somebody else’s fault. When we do that we’re standing dangerously close to the border of indifference.

Powerlessness is the middle ground between fight and flight. We are powerless to fight the world’s situations on our terms and we are powerless to get away from them. That is a source of much of our fear, anxiety, anger and frustration. The same powerlessness, however, is our way forward.

Our powerlessness opens us to a new and different source of empowerment. Instead of limiting possibilities, our powerlessness creates new possibilities with the one who is more powerful. Powerlessness does not mean we have no choices, it means we must make different choices. We may be powerless to change the world but we can choose to change ourselves. We may be powerless to escape the world but we can choose to live a different way.

Isn't that what John the Baptist is telling those who come to him? He doesn't ask them to change the world but to change themselves. He doesn't tell them to quit their jobs but to live a different life. The crowds who came to him couldn't eliminate poverty, but they could share what they have with the cold and hungry. The tax collectors who came to him could not overhaul the tax code, but they could be honest. The soldiers who came to him could not end the Roman occupation, but they could act with integrity and not abuse their power. In each of those situations John focuses on people and relationships. His answers are simple, concrete and practical.

Let's look at our art today on the front of your bulletin or on the screen. It is entitled A Closer Walk by Rev. T. Denise Anderson and she says this about her art.

"As I meditated on the theme, Close to Home, I decided that what makes a place "home" for me is people. That realization informed my decision to explore this theme through portraiture – the depiction of people. The references of each of the depictions I've painted are actual Palestinians and Israelis. It's important to me to bring this ancient story truly close to home as we consider the current geopolitical realities in the land of the Advent story. I encourage you to read more about the stories of those who inspired their depictions.

My depiction of John the Baptist is inspired by Abuna (meaning Father) Elias Chacour, who was the Archbishop of Akko, Haifa, Nazareth and All Galill of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church. A Palestinian Arab-Israeli, Abuna Chacour is a well respected activist and educator who established the Mar Elias Educational Institutions in Ibillin, which educate students of multiple religious backgrounds – Arab and Israeli – from kindergarten through high school. His life's work embodies the courageous and prophetic pointing to a better way that I also see in John the Baptist.

John's words in the text are so full of imagery that it's impossible to fit it all in one image. The shape of his tunic recalls the base of the tree referenced in verse 9. In the background is an obvious path, recalling John's clear instruction to his listeners. Share your belongings! Do not extort people! His counsel is so simple, yet apparently so hard to follow. The path leads to the sunrise on a new day, the colors of which allude to the fire of Jesus' baptism. In his hand is a key, which is a symbol that you'll see in my other works. For Palestinians, the key represents a longing and determination to return home from displacement.

Just a side note, I watched an interview with Abuna Chacour and he calls himself another man from Galilee. He came to the United States to visit our secretary of state, James Baker at that time to plead on behalf of the Palestinian people. Only he didn't make an appointment. When he was told he couldn't see the secretary of state, Chacour responded. I am another man from Galilee. We don't make appointments, we make appearances.

That's what we need to do, for a just world. Let's not make appointments but appearances. Let's fight for everyone to have exactly what they need. Let's get to know people, really know them, like NOAH does. Let's call everyone by their name! Let's call them by their preferred pronouns! Let's learn their stories. Let's give people one of our shirts if they have none! Let's act with integrity.

Isn't that what we are doing with our redevelopment project? Making sure everyone has a home. Making sure everyone has the resources they need to be able to stay in that home?

Our poem for today is called "Advocating for Home, by Rev. Sarah Speed, and she says it is written for all who identify as transgender and/or non-binary.

I know you don't feel at home in your body. Your clothes don't feel right. Your bones don't feel right. Your name, just a word that people have labeled you with. I see the way you try on pronouns like I try on clothes, looking for something – anything – that feels right.

And what I would give to build you a shelter – a safe space where you could be, a home where you were safe and free. What I could give to carve out some room for you to process and grieve and dance and sing your way into your true self. But I know it's not that easy.

My hands cannot build you safety.
My words cannot give you time.
My heart cannot be home enough.
So until the day when you are truly at home,
I will keep marching for you.
I will keep advocating for the home you deserve –
the home in your own skin.
I will keep praying.
I will give you my second coat,
and the shirt off my back, and the food from my table.
I won't give up on preparing the way.

A voice calling out in the wilderness.
Do you hear it?

There's more of us here than has been before.

What then shall we do? For those who want the world fixed, John's answers are not very satisfactory. Poverty still remains, unjust economic systems still exist, and power is still abused. But if we are honest, Jesus didn't really fix the world either. He engaged and gave himself to the world one person, one relationship and one moment at a time. He loved the world to death and beyond. He showed a different way of being, a different way of living and relating, he offered different priorities and values, and then invited us to participate and follow him. In doing all that he showed us what it means and looks like to be human, to be the dwelling place of God.

What then should we do? This probably won't come as a surprise to some of you but I can't tell you. I cannot answer that question for you. It's your question to ask and yours to answer. As Cintron-Olivieri says in her commentary, If all flesh shall see the salvation of God, we all have a part to play in the salvation story, in leveling valleys and righting wrongs. Like John, we are also called for a specific place and time. Here and now. Be at the ready, and bear fruit worthy of repentance, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, giving voice to the silenced and oppressed, speaking truth to power, and protecting and empowering the vulnerable. Let our collective voice cry out in the wilderness – and everywhere with exhortation and good news. And, as the message is heard, more and more people will join us in building the kin-dom of God, making it truly a home for all. Amen