

“A Word of God Happened”

Luke 3:1-6

There is a right time for things. There is a right time to plant potatoes, to prune apple trees, and, if you believe one persistent ad on TV, there is a time when the moment is just right for making love.

One of those right times came, according to the Gospel of Luke, at a particular moment in history which the writer tries to pinpoint with political precision:

- the fifteenth year of Emperor Tiberius,
- Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,
- Herod was ruler of Galilee,
- his brother Philip ruled Ituraea and Trachonitis,
- Lysanias was ruler of Abilene,
- and it was during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.

It was at that moment, says the writer, when the time was right. The stars were aligned. The angels were whispering. And one man, John, son of Zechariah, who made his home in the desert, was listening. The way he says it is: “the word of God came to John....” Or, as someone else has put it, “a word of God happened.”¹

I like that! It was a happening, an event! And John, as a person, was an event! If we had been among the crowds that came from Jerusalem and other parts of Judea down to the Jordan River to hear John preach, it would have been something to go home and tell about. We would have told our grandchildren about it.

Abraham Lincoln said once that he liked to listen to a preacher who looked like he was fighting a swarm of bees. I have a feeling that he would have enjoyed hearing John.

It might have been like hearing Billy Sunday, that fiery fundamentalist preacher of the early 1900's. An outfielder for what was called at that time the Chicago White Stockings, and later the Philadelphia Phillies and other teams in the late 1800's, he had a dramatic conversion experience, went on the road, and eventually became the most famous evangelist of the day “with his colloquial sermons and frenetic delivery.”²

Or, maybe it would have been like being at one of the standing-room-only tent revivals of Aimee Semple McPherson at about that same time. In San Diego they brought the National Guard in to control the crowd of over 30,000 people.

Or like hearing Billy Graham, as I did as a boy, at Madison Square Garden, along with thousands of others, a huge choir led by Cliff Barrows, George Beverly Shay singing his signature solo of *His Eye is On the Sparrow*. And then when the invitation was given, hundreds of people streaming forward. Later I learned that there were also hundreds of volunteer counselors who walked forward the minute the invitation was given to sort of prime the pump. Still, it was a happening! To my young impressionable mind it was extraordinary, spectacular!

Or to bring it closer to home, it might have been like going to hear Charles Grandison Finney in the summer of 1826 right here in Auburn at First Presbyterian Church. It, too, was a happening. "...sinners groaned and wept as Finney told them they were no different than the legions of hell....Meetings sometimes went on all night and 'sinners' who were absent were prayed for by name."³

Like John the Baptizer, Finney called for personal repentance, but he also took on social reform. He "led a remarkable series of revivals in the...northeast for almost thirty-five years, helped found the country's first race and gender inclusive college, fought against slavery, the abuses of alcohol, and played a role in women's rights...."⁴ It is reported that "when he spoke, his body writhed and he seemed possessed by the Holy Spirit. From his ordination in 1824 until his death in 1875, he was the most popular preacher in America."⁵

Like John, Finney had a simple message. John's message was very simple: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." And it was a happening! People came from all around to hear him.

But does a word of God happen only to wild-eyed, bee-swatting preachers? What about us? Can a word of God happen to us? I suppose you could say that we Presbyterians don't fall into the same category as John and some of the other firebrands like Finney, Billy Sunday, and Aimee McPherson. None of them had any formal training.

Of Finney we read that "without benefit of college, law school, or seminary he had become first a lawyer by studying privately with a judge and then an ordained minister after his conversion...."⁶ Finney believed that a man (it was men in those days), if armed with the right spirit, could move from "plow to pulpit" with a minimum of training. This sounded appealing to presbyteries that were "chronically short of ministers and to whom the idea of seminary training was a new idea in any case."⁷

When he came to Auburn, he was at odds with some at those at Auburn seminary, like Dr. James Richards, who believed and were committed to sending out men who had had four years of college and three of seminary training, who had studied Greek, Latin and Hebrew and were familiar with earlier theologians, church history, and classical rhetoric.

So in that summer of 1826 here in Auburn there was a head to head battle between Finney and the Seminary. Many of the seminary students attended the Finney's revival meetings and were told to reject their elders (meaning their professors). Finney even encouraged them to pray for Dr. Richards that he would be converted! But in the end, Finney's efforts here in Auburn did not bring a full blown revival, as they did in other places. There were only fifty-four converts. The seminary was safe.⁸ And despite any impressions one might get here to the contrary, an educated clergy became the norm in Presbyterian churches. In the old tension between *ardor* and *order*, order and the education that was part of that order, became the standard.

So when we read the story of John coming to the Jordan to announce the arrival of Christ, if we were to make a comparison to our own day, we would have to say that we in the churches, and especially the clergy, would be more like the Pharisees and the Sadducees who were critical of both John and Jesus. We are part of the establishment. We tend to look down our theological noses at those who do not have the proper credentials.

But again, I wonder, does that mean that a Word of God cannot happen to us? Can orderly Presbyterians whose ministers normally don't wave their arms around as much as some, still listen, still prepare their hearts, still be ready?

Well, I guess you know my answer, or I wouldn't be here. I believe we can. I'm not saying that we couldn't use a little more fire in our faith now and then. But without disparaging other ways of worshiping, a thoughtful, quieter, orderly approach to things spiritual is, I believe, a valid one. And yes, I do think that we have happenings to rival even John at the Jordan, right here in this sanctuary.

For me there is a happening every Sunday when we gather, and I hope for you also. Every Sunday as the sanctuary fills, a slow trickle before 9:30 and then a mad rush around 9:35, as the people come from their homes and from their weeks filled with whatever it is that they are filled with, and come and sit in these pews, sing the hymns, pray the prayers, recite the responses, and listen for a word from God, something happens. I believe that. And when we share the bread and the cup, as we will this morning, something happens. It is a happening. The angels are whispering, and if you are listening, you can hear them.

¹ Edward Schweitzer, quoted in *Word & Witness*, 12/4/94

² *wikipedia*

³ *Before the Throne of Grace*, Laura S. Seitz and Elaine D. Baxter, p. 182

⁴ *Charles Finney: Revivalist, Abolitionist, Suffragist*, Michael Darden

⁵ history.sandiego.edu, *The Burned Over District*

⁶ *Before the Throne...*p. 182

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 174

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 183