

“Waiting in Line”
Luke 3:1-18
2nd Sunday of Advent

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Westminster, Greenville
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A couple weeks ago, I received via email our bill for Internet service at our house. It looked a little large. So I opened the details for the bill, and sure enough—there was a charge for \$99 for a service repair.

Now it’s true that we had called to have our Internet worked on.
But the fix occurred at a box down the street, not on our premises.
The service technician assured us at the time that there would be no charge.

So...I called the company that supplies our Internet, and heard a recording.
“Your wait time will be one minute.”

One minute went by.
Five minutes went by.
Fifteen minutes went by.

Clearly, I was waiting in line for someone to take my call.

Finally, a voice comes on the other end.
I describe the situation, and the person says we’ll need to pay.
So I explain the situation again, and the person says that someone came to our house.

Yes, someone came to our house, but was unable to fix anything in our house because the problem wasn’t in our house. Then someone else came out, and discovered that the problem was down the street. With YOUR box. Not our box.

But there was a house-call.
I know there was...never mind—and I hand the phone to my wife.

She explains the situation.
She gets told that they’ll transfer us to the technical department, who will then need to verify that the fix was in fact not on our property, but down the street.

My wife is on hold and on hold...

And what do you think happened in the process of waiting on hold for the transfer?

My wife was DISCONNECTED from the call.

All that took half-an-hour...and we got nowhere.

Which meant calling back a couple days later, knowing that once again, I would likely be put on hold, and once again, I would have to wait...in line...to talk to someone...who will put me in another line...to talk to someone.

I mean ugh.

Have you ever been in a line like that before?

Who here REALLY LOOKS FORWARD to waiting in line?

Of course not.

This is why executives at a Houston airport made an INTRIGUING decision a while back.

According to a newspaper article a few years ago, “Passengers were lodging an inordinate number of complaints about the long waits at baggage claim. In response, the executives increased the number of baggage handlers working that shift. The plan worked: the average wait fell to eight minutes, well within industry benchmarks.”

But the executives were stunned when they saw that the complaints kept coming in. So they did some further study, and learned that passengers were able to get off the plane and to the baggage claim in ONE minute, which meant that they ended up waiting for their baggage to arrive for SEVEN minutes.

So what did that Houston airport do?

They moved the arrival gates as far away from baggage claim as they could.

“Passengers now had to walk six times longer to get their bags.”¹

And the complaints?

They virtually DISAPPEARED!

The time it took to leave the airport was absolutely the same!

¹ “Why Waiting Is Torture,” by Alex Stone, *The New York Times*, August 18, 2012.

But the time spent waiting in line...was nothing.

How do you feel about waiting in line?

I ask because the season of Advent is about WAITING...how we wait, what we do while we wait for the birth of our Savior and Lord, for God's advent in our lives.

And I think our text from Luke today has something to say about waiting...in line. In our text, people were waiting in line to be baptized by John in the Jordan River.

I say there was a line, that's an assumption on my part—but I think it's a safe assumption.

There must have been SOMETHING resembling a line.

Luke writes that, "crowds...came out to be baptized by him..."

I'm assuming that John didn't throw water on everyone at once!
I'm assuming that he took people, one at a time, and they went under the water of the Jordan River one at a time...

I'm assuming that there was some sort of line.

So my question this morning is very simple.

Would you have stood that line?

Would you and I have waited and waited to be baptized by John in the River Jordan?

Easy question to ask, but perhaps not an easy question to answer.

I want you to look again at what John was preaching.

What kind of preacher was John?

Luke writes that John was "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins..."

Well, that sounds good. John was a forgiveness preacher.

But that's not all he was!

- John said, “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”
- John said, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Would you and I wait in line after hearing all THAT?

Would you have waited in line to be both judged and forgiven by John?

I don't know...

After all, judgment is no fun to receive.

I remember the time, many years ago now, when I had done something that was very wrong. Without going into details, I had tried, with some friends, to pull a prank on someone, and it all backfired.

The person that we pulled the prank on—this person could have called the police. And for whatever reason, this person chose not to call the police.

No one got hurt in the end, but I knew better than to do what I did.
And I felt guilty.

And after all was said and done, I went to this minister I knew, and I told her about it, about what I did, because I wanted to get it off my chest, and I wondered what she would say.

Would she say, “Ben, God forgives you, it's all going to be ok...”??

Would she say, “Ben, you've clearly beaten yourself up enough, just let it go...”

No.

This minister looked me in the eye and finally she said, “Ben—that was INCREDIBLY DUMB!!”

And I knew I needed to hear her judgment.

And I knew that I wanted to run away from that very same judgment.

Do you know what it's like to receive judgment—not unfair judgment, but SPOT-ON judgment—spoken from someone who loves you, someone you trust?

John's message is that no one escapes God's judgment.

The One who loves us beyond our imagining judges us—not through punishment, but by helping us to see the truth about our lives.

That's the judgment John is preaching.

Would you have waited in this line?

Think hard about this now.

Because it's not just you in this line.

It's everyone.

According to Luke, even tax collectors and soldiers came to be baptized by John.

Tax collectors were REVILED in Jesus' day. Tax collectors were cooperating with the Romans, participating in dishonest acquisition of their own people's money. In other words, they were considered CROOKS!

And when Luke says soldiers, what Luke is describing are Roman soldiers. Occupying soldiers. Enemy soldiers. Soldiers who could do what they wanted with an Israelite, whenever they wanted to do it, and most likely they would get away with it.

If there were two groups of people that John would surely condemn, these would be it!

Can you imagine the scene?

Imagine that you're waiting to be baptized by John.

You're standing in line, and you notice that 2 or 3 ahead of you, there's this soldier. And 2 or 3 ahead of him, there's this tax collector. And you're laughing quietly to yourself, because you know you've led a better life than those two. Your children went to a fine high school in the Galilean district, you raised your kids in the synagogue, even took them on mission trips to Samaria.

You've surely made mistakes in your life, but you've done good things with your life too.

Not like those repulsive people standing in line ahead of you.

They came to be baptized by John?

Hah!

John's really going to let them have it, you just know it!

Here it comes.

The tax collector says, "Teacher, what should we do?"

And John says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

Wait...what's that?

Isn't that letting him off a little EASY, John?

Aren't you supposed to tell him to consorting with the enemy??

What happened to "brood of vipers"??

What happened to the axe that was ready at the foot of the tree?

Or never mind the tax collector, here comes the soldier. You can't wait to hear what John says to this soldier...

Surely, John will tell any Roman soldier that before baptism, he must FIRST worship the Jewish God, and second, he must stop referring to the Emperor as "Lord," and third, he should find a new line of work...

"Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?'

He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations, and be satisfied with your wages.'"

That's IT??!!

Do not extort? Be satisfied with your wages??!!

These are Roman Soldiers, John!

Why are you pulling your punches?

Why aren't you punishing them for what they've done wrong?

Why are you giving Roman soldiers hope for their future?

What kind of a line is this, anyway? I thought this was a JUDGMENT line!!

See, if I'm standing in line to be baptized by John, and I see a tax collector get off without being punished for what he did, and if I see a Roman soldier baptized and welcomed by John into the fold—I just don't know if I would want to keep standing in that line.

Would you keep standing in that line?

A colleague once told the story about being on an airplane long ago. He was traveling by himself, and another guy sat down next to him, and from the moment this guy settled into HIS seat, he kept the flight attendant busy with special requests.

He pushed the button—
and the flight attendant came—
and this guy, he said to the attendant:

“I ordered a special meal.”

And she said, “Yes, I know...we'll bring it at the right time.”

Two or three minutes later, he pushed the button again, and she came. He said, “Isn't it time for me to receive my special meal?” And she said, “Well...it's about time. I'll bring it out.”

And she brought it, and he UNVEILED it—
and it was a glob of cottage cheese, with some slices of fruit,
and a few crackers.

And the gentleman who ordered the special meal was all smiles, very pleased.

Then the flight attendant brought everyone else's meal. My colleague took the cover off of his plastic meal tray—and what do you think was in that tray?

It was a glob of cottage cheese, with some crackers and some fruit!

And the man with the special meal looked at my colleague's meal.

And he said, "Did you order a special meal?"

My colleague replied, "I didn't order a special meal."

And he noticed others receiving their meals—

the cottage cheese, the fruit, the crackers—

so he pushed the button AGAIN, and she came,

and he said, "I ordered a special meal!"

She said, "Isn't this what you ordered, cottage cheese and fruit?"

And he said, "But I ordered a SPECIAL meal!"

And she said, "That IS the special meal."

"But everybody else has this!"

"Well, sir, that's what we're serving today."

And with a bit of profanity, he sputtered out, "I'm never riding this airline again!"²

Now...what did that man want?

He wanted cottage cheese and fruit.

But what did he really, REALLY want?

See, I think this is what's so disturbing about waiting in line to be baptized by John. There's this LEVELING that seems to occur, where everyone gets the same thing.

"Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low..."

Great news if you're in the valley, and you know you're in the valley, and you know you can't get yourself out of the hole that you've dug for yourself.

² I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for this story, which I believe was first told by Dr. Fred Craddock.

But if you feel like you've climbed the mountain of life pretty well...and John comes along quoting Isaiah, saying that the mountain is coming down—LEVELED...and FORGIVENESS, abundant mercy, grace upon grace will be with everyone...

Is that what you want?

Is that why you got in line, to be baptized by John?

Does it matter, when you receive more grace than you can fathom, that everyone else is also receiving the same thing?

I suspect that sometime between today and Christmas Day, you will have to wait in line.

At the grocery store,
or at the mall, or on the phone...

The next time you have time to kill in line, I want you to imagine that the people in front of you are not nameless, unknown strangers in front of you.

I want you to imagine that **the person two people in front of you** is someone who has been DISHONEST with you in your life.

Can you think of that person?

I can think of that person, someone who was very sneaky with me five years ago, and still...just thinking about this person makes me mad.

And imagine that **right behind that person is the politician in this country** that riles you up the most. I won't name names, because it's not the same name for all of us. But surely, there is at least one politician that you read about that REALLY gets your goat.

Imagine she's in line. Imagine that he's in line.

And then, **standing right behind you, I want you to picture someone who once hurt a member of your family.** Someone once hurt a member of my extended family, and I still get tied up in knots, just thinking about that person.

And they are all in this line to receive the judgment of God, and with that judgment comes the forgiveness of God. They're waiting in line to be baptized by John the Baptist, and he's offering them a chance to repent, a second chance, just like me.

Would you stay in that line?
I'm not staying.

I'm leaving the line.
I'm taking my things, and I'm going back home.

But on my way home, as I walk by all these other people that I don't know,
I'm stunned to see a face that I DO know.

You know who I see in that line, on my way home?
It's Jesus.
You've got to be kidding me.

But it's true. Luke tells us, just a few verses later—verse 21—that Jesus was part of the crowd that came out to be baptized by John in the Jordan.

That means Jesus—he's waiting in this line.
This line that's filled with violent offenders and not-so-reputable politicians as well as the good, well-meaning folks who have gone to church their entire lives...this line also has Jesus.

Do you think I should get back in?
Do you and I belong in a line where absolutely ANYBODY can have a second chance?

Just something to think about the next time you're waiting to pay for your groceries at Harris Teeter or Whole Foods...

(Amen.)