

“Orville, Wilbur, Arthur and John”
Luke 3: 7-18 – December 13, 2009

INTRO: Today’s reading includes most of Luke’s account of the ministry of John the Baptist, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth—the same Zechariah we heard about in last week’s Gospel. John’s ministry was to pave the way for Jesus. John was a prophetic voice—someone who called for people to change their ways and repent. He both prepared the way and provided a model for the ministry of Jesus that followed

The Wright Brothers of Dayton Ohio, are on the short list of people who have changed the course of history. On Dec. 17, 1903—106 years ago this week, these bicycle-making brothers flew into the air, at the controls of a small bi-wing air-plane, and achieved an altitude of maybe 30 feet. In the process, they developed steering techniques that are still in use today in airplanes, spacecrafts, submarines, and robots. Orville took off from the Outer Banks of NC, near Kitty Hawk, on that day in December. He flew the gasoline-powered Wright Flyer for 12 seconds. That same day, Wilbur piloted the plane for 59 seconds, covering a grand total of 852 feet. *(The Capital Times, 12/8/03)*

Because of these flights, people started to look at the sky and think differently. What had been impossible a day before was now possible. Worlds that had been inaccessible were now accessible. Bill Gates puts it in perspective when he says that: “The Wright Brothers created the single greatest cultural force since the invention of writing. The airplane became the first World Wide Web, bringing people, languages, ideas, and values together.” *(Homiletics, 12/03)*

A Wisconsin person who literally flew on the shirrtails of the Wright Brothers, was Arthur Warner, who piloted the first flight here, Nov. 4, 1909. In Beloit, they had a special commemoration last month. Arthur was a tinkerer and inventor, fascinated by the latest technology. He bought his plane as a kit, from aviation pioneer Glenn Curtiss, assembled it, and took off from a field in Beloit. Warner didn’t know how to turn the plane, which resembled a giant tricycle with wings. He got about 50 feet off the ground and traveled a quarter mile before landing. He then walked the plane around and did the whole thing a half dozen times, until he landed hard enough to break something he couldn’t fix. *(Journal Sentinel, 11/4/09)*

Orville, Wilbur and Arthur are people who helped others to think about new possibilities. There are certainly other days in history when people started to think differently. The day a baby was born in Bethlehem was one of those days that will go down in history, even though we may not know the exact date or exact place of his birth. With the birth of Jesus, everything changed. The fact that over 2,000 years later, we’re still discussing the meaning and impact of his life, says it was a history making day.

And John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, also left his mark on the people of his time. His are not easy words to hear—these aren’t complements to a well behaved audience. He looked at the behavior of his peers and pretty much lambasted them for how they are choosing to live. “You bunch of snakes! Do something to show that you’ve really given up your sins.” (vs. 8-9) Turn yourself around and get yourself in line with God. If you’ve got two coats, give one to a person who doesn’t have one. If you’re a tax collector, collect no more than what is right. If you are a soldier, don’t extort anyone by threats or false accusations. Live moral, ethical lives.

It makes me think that we could use a little John the Baptist thinking in our world, when it comes to the arena of investment scams and shaky mortgages.

Two fellows opened a butcher shop and prospered. Then an evangelist came to town and one of the butchers got religion. He tried to persuade his partner to become a follower of Christ, but to no avail. “Why won’t you follow Christ, Charlie?” asked the new convert. “Listen, Lester,” the other butcher said. “If we’re going to continue to prosper and make money, if I get religion too, then who’s going to weigh the meat?”

The bottom line for John the Baptist is that we’ve got to conform our lives to God’s ways. He makes it very clear that an ancestral heritage of faithful people, doesn’t mean a thing. People can’t ride on their ancestor’s shirrtails. “Don’t start saying that you belong to Abraham’s family. God can turn these stones into children for Abraham.” These people were in the family line of Abraham. So they thought of their ancestral connects as a free pass. They didn’t think they needed to be concerned about the way they lived their own lives, because they were children of Abraham. In their eyes, that gave them special standing.

John was speaking to a generation that saw themselves as privileged, as exempt, as beyond needing to repent. And John says, “Forget Abraham! What God can’t find are people whose lives bear fruit.”

Sometimes the church gets itself into trouble, either because it is still riding on the shirttails, the reputation, of those faithful church members of years gone by, or because it has chosen to respond to new calls for ministry, and some don’t like the changes.

First United Methodist Church in Madison, is located about a block off of capital square. You can see the capital from the church. This particular church has always had a strong music and arts program, and when it comes to the finest of cultural offerings, First Church has provided them. A few years ago, they were trying to determine whether they were going to remodel their building, or perhaps move to a different site. In the process, they developed a mission statement which said they are “Downtown for Good”—a catchy statement on more than one level. Since then, I think they’ve really lived into that mission statement. They have a food pantry that is used by lots of people.

Around capital square, there are a number of homeless people who spend some of their days in the basement of the capital, and their nights at Grace Episcopal Church nearby. Consequently, people walk the streets, to get to the food pantry at First Church. The owner of a parking ramp, just across from the church, had graciously allowed the church to use his ramp on Sundays, for free, until a few years ago. He contacted the church and said that their food pantry was attracting far too many street people, which gave a bad impression to visitors to the Capital. And unless the church did away with that ministry, he would revoke the use of the parking ramp. I think every United Methodist person in the Madison area was holding their breath to see what would happen. The church had a big meeting where its members gathered to discuss the situation. And the next thing we knew, the church was making other arrangements for parking. They published maps for their long-time, able-bodied members, to suggest they use some of the city parking garages that were further from the church, allowing visitors and those who had trouble walking, to park in the few spaces behind the church and on the street nearby. I was so proud of that congregation. They were neither bound by the past, nor by one individual. Their congregation was bearing good fruit, by continuing to provide food for hungry people.

Perhaps someone could simply write off the fact that hungry, homeless people are on the streets of our capital city. And maybe some believe it’s just a necessary evil, but something they don’t like to see because it runs down the neighborhood. “Once we assuage our conscience by calling something a ‘necessary evil,’ it begins to look more and more necessary and less and less evil.”

(Sidney J. Harris)

The church wasn’t going to turn a blind eye to the injustices they saw right around them in their city. No matter what the ministry of the church might have been in days past, this is a part of their ministry today.

Regardless of where a church is located, “there are opportunities to do God's will, to be God's people, all around us. These opportunities are shaped by our context: the roles in which we find ourselves and the needs of the neighbor with which we are confronted. But make no mistake, opportunities abound.” (David Lose)

There is always someone with whom we can share an extra coat we have, or extra food that’s in our cupboard.

Those people John was speaking to long ago, couldn’t live off the possible good behavior of their ancestors or of faithful old Abraham. John was challenging them to take responsibility for their own lives—to see that their character and behaviors were consistent with those of Abraham. But they couldn’t just ride along on Abraham’s reputation.

Riding along on someone’s shirt-tails, may be some of what Orville Wright might have done. He’s the one who piloted that first plane. Yet it was Wilbur, and Wilbur alone, who first figured everything out. It was Wilbur who experimented with gliders and devised a power machine, and made all the crucial decisions that produced the first airplane. It was Wilbur who designed the first practical airplane propeller. Orville assisted him, but Wilbur was the real genius, and lucky for Orville, he got to come along for the ride.

History got recorded the way it did, giving us that idea that these inventors shared the work, probably because Wilbur died in 1912 and Orville outlived him by 36 years, so he could tell the story any way he wanted! (*The Capital Times*, 12/8/03)

So, Wilbur, with the assistance of his brother Orville, helped our world move into a new age. After many attempts, they finally got their flying machine off the ground. They telegraphed their excitement to their sister Katherine: "We've actually flown 120 feet. Will be home for Christmas." Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper and showed him the message. He glanced at it and said, "How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas." (*Homiletics*, 12/03)

He totally missed the big news—the real news—they had flown!

In a week and a half, we will celebrate the birth of someone who is always trying to get us to see things differently. Let's not miss the real news, that it's not so important what gifts we get, but what gifts we might give. As we share food with the hungry, clothing with those who are in need, baby items with newborns who could use some extra help, our lives will be bearing the kinds of fruit John spoke about, and Christ will be born once again.

--Sue Burwell