

A Baptism

**First Parish Congregational Church, UCC
Third Sunday of Advent, 2006
Rev. Lucy M. Alexander**

**Luke 3:7-18
Philippians 4:4-7**

You've lived in the village for 18 years. The years have gone by fast. Looking back, they almost seem dreamlike. You can look at pictures in albums or on the wall and remember events, but somehow you can't get back inside those events. It's as if they happened outside yourself, to someone else. It hasn't been a bad life. Quite the opposite. You've been blessed with a husband, children. While not wealthy, you've been comfortable. And nothing major has happened to you by way of personal or family crises. You do work that you enjoy. You participate in the synagogue services and have a sense of belonging and community outside your family. Life could easily go on this way. You see yourself getting older, enjoying grown children and grandchildren. Taking it a little bit easier as others begin to bear some of the burden of the work that needs to get done. Your friends say that you are lucky. And you know that is true.

For about the last twelve months, though, something has been happening inside you. A restlessness has opened up inside you. It began almost imperceptibly. You hardly noticed it. A twinge as evening came on, when you were alone, and before the preparations for the family dinner. A feeling of hunger. For *what* you couldn't have said. You didn't quite dare call it dissatisfaction. How could you? There was so much to be thankful for in your life. But there it was all the same. That feeling of being outside your life every once in a while and looking in. Just as a homeless person might look longingly in at candles on the tables of homes. But this *was* your home. This *was* your life. You were not an outsider. So where did this feeling come from? What was it about? You could scarcely say. But it wouldn't go away. On the contrary. It had grown into an almost daily anxiety.

The other day, a neighbor had come over. She had talked of this man who was a preacher. "Can you believe it?" she said. "He seems to have come out of nowhere and yet people are flocking to go and see him. He's got to be crazy. Dangerous, even. They say he has spent months in the desert. What could he possibly have been doing out there? You've got to be careful these days. There are so many out there saying one thing or another. If we don't watch it, they'll lead our children astray. Our community will be disrupted. Have you heard of that cult they've established down on the Dead Sea? They say the world is coming to an end. That's what they might think. But I like my world plenty fine, thank you. I've worked hard to build this world and I'm not going to let some nut come and destroy it. So you watch out. You might want to be extra careful the next couple of months. You know, watch your kids. Keep an eye on those around you. These people have a way of drawing others to them in some pretty suspicious ways."

You listened to her. And of course you thought she was right. There were all kinds of characters out there. Especially these days with the harshness of the Roman occupation. And things were hard a good bit of the time. You yourself had been stopped along the road, accused of not paying your taxes. People were fearful. Life did feel chaotic and dangerous sometimes. It was important, especially now, to be careful. To lock your doors at night. To be wary of strangers. To keep to your own, to those you knew to be safe.

Of course you thought she was right. You even knew she was right. And yet there was that sense of longing, of restlessness inside you that just wouldn't seem to let go, no matter what you did. You tried everything. You went away for a couple of days with your husband. You went on a diet and tried to exercise more. You tried reaching out in new ways into the community, hoping that if you did enough for others, the feeling might ease. But nothing seemed to help.

So one day, when the feeling seems almost unbearable, you make a decision. "I'm going." Your family is horrified. This is a side of you they've never seen. "Don't go," they say. "You could be in danger. You could be hurt." And the voices inside you are contradictory as well. Is this really the right thing to do? Or are you being a total fool? Putting your whole life – that life you have worked so hard for – in jeopardy. Are you letting them down? After all, who are you to suddenly take off and go to the River Jordan out of the blue. You have things you should be doing. Places you should go. Someone you should be. What will your friends say? Maybe you really are crazy, just like that preacher.

But one day you simply must go. And so you set out. You've never traveled like this before. Alone. On a journey that you yourself have been impelled to make. You are nervous. But you also feel strangely light and free. Already there is an easing inside you just by the fact that you have made this decision. Somehow you have been able to feel and listen to those stirrings inside you. Somehow you have been able to listen to your own voice. Somehow you have been able to stand up to others whose truths you haven't really been able to believe to be true. This is your journey and that, in itself, seems miraculous to you.

And yet you are far from alone. Sooner than you think, you find yourself approaching the River Jordan, where they say that this preacher is to be found. But even before you get there, you hear a noise. There's a crowd, almost like one at a big sporting event. And, as you draw closer, you see the river full of throngs of people. It feels almost like a celebration. Where have all these people come from? You expected one man, alone by the river, talking quietly to just a few. Is it possible that so many others have felt what you have felt? Is it possible that something that felt so private could in fact be felt by so many others? Is it possible that, like you, all these people have felt that quiet joy stirring inside them as they made this journey?

As you come closer, you begin to hear the words of this man they have all come to see and hear. And you are completely shocked. "You brood of vipers!" he calls to the crowd. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance." What kind of words are these? They are harsh, unyielding. They cut like a sword. They pierce you. Their pain is almost physical. And yet, at the same time, that pain is a relief. The words of this man are true in a way you have never heard truth. His words, like the sword that they are, lance the deepest part of you. That part that has been

hidden. That part you have been afraid to show. That part that you have kept well out of sight, for fear that someone might discover who you really are.

You hover near the edges of the crowd, unsure. But then you feel an arm around you. You suddenly find yourself part of this mass of people, restless, longing, hopeful, just as you are. You find yourself moving forward, moved along by the crowd. All these people have come from so many different places. And yet here they are, like one body, swaying, shouting, crying, touching. You are part of them and they have propelled you forward. And now here you are, just at the edge of the water. You hear the preacher's words again, "you brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" And it is as if you have already had cold water poured over your head. Your body begins to tingle, almost as if you are waking up after a deep sleep. You are alert and this is a new feeling. You are aware; all your senses are drinking in this man, the heat of the desert, the water that you find at your feet. And you trust yourself and this moment. You take the plunge.

All of a sudden, you are deep in the River Jordan. Underwater there is a sudden quiet. As if the world has stopped. You are surrounded by this substance they call water. Your whole body is submerged. It is a foreign substance. You can't breathe. And somehow you are no longer who you thought you were. You have left yourself back on the banks of this river. You have become one with the water, with all those who are in the river with you. And in this strange place, with these strange people, you feel more at home than you have ever felt before. When you feel yourself on the brink of drowning, you burst forth through the surface of the river and you hear a voice from heaven saying to you, "You are my daughter, the beloved. With you I am well pleased."

How is it that so many of us spend our lives running away? And I don't mean just the one who goes home to a couple of drinks and forgetfulness. I don't mean just the one who finds herself moving from one place to another as life gets too complicated. I don't mean just the one who abandons his own dreams and places them as burdens on his children's shoulders. I don't mean just the one who can't go home for Thanksgiving or Christmas because there is that sister they must face, or that parent they have never been able to come to terms with. I don't mean just the one who feels such shame that he keeps herself in constant motion, hoping that the shame will never catch up with him. I mean all of us. I mean the running we all do, each and every day. A running away from being from being able to be who we are: God's beloved children in this time and in this place. A running away from who God has created us to be: this particular person.

You head back home to your village and you know in the depths of your being that the One who is to come has already begun to arrive. Because you are beginning to feel alive. You are beginning to recognize the death you have been living. The sleep you have been sleeping. You begin to understand that you have hovered in the corners of your life, not daring to come into the fullness of yourself. Like the homeless person, you have gazed longingly in at the candles on the table, unable to come inside and take a seat. There has never been any room for you in the inn. And perhaps there still isn't. But there is plenty of room for you in places you have never before dared to look.