

“Lucy: Let Go of Control”

December 9, 2018

A Charlie Brown Advent series – Advent 2 – Holy Baptism

Note: We’re grateful to Faith Church in Bellafonte, PA for the idea for this series.

For 53 years, we’ve been watching Charlie Brown search for meaning in this season. Maybe we see ourselves in him - or at least have permission to search and wonder. Maybe we identify with his insecurities and struggles. Maybe we’re just pulled in by the fact that he reaches deep down and is willing to admit that he’s just not feeling it in the Christmas season.

These days, we have every bit of information at our fingertips, and yet we’re still searching for meaning. Some say we’re in a time when we have more than enough information, but we’re starved for meaning. Even 53 years ago, Charles Schultz’s unconventional approach to the holidays - even when he tackled consumerism and commercialization - sticks.

I’ll be honest: I see myself in Charlie Brown, but it’s even easier for me to identify with Lucy. I hope I don’t come off as someone who knows it all, has all of the answers, takes every opportunity to share an opinion, or pulls the football away just when someone tries to kick it. That’s just mean! But, there’s something about Lucy and her need for control. Maybe you can relate to her, too? Please tell me I’m not alone!

Lucy likes to be in charge. Why else would you set up a psychiatric help booth? The need for quality mental health care is a reality in our world, but Lucy’s bend always seems to have something to do with control - and her own need for it!

After Linus tells Charlie Brown that he’s making a problem out of Christmas, Charlie Brown goes to Lucy who tells him he needs to get involved in something - like the Christmas play that needs a director (and by the way, she’ll be there to help!). Her answer is to get involved and take control - to get busier!

I like to be in control. I think that’s true for most of us. We like to make the rules. We like to get our way. And when plans change or things don’t turn out like we want them to or when we feel out of control, then we feel anxious and upset.

This time of year is a prime time for the desire to make everything “perfect” and to keep everything under control. That might mean making our homes look perfect, getting outside lights just right (remember Clark Griswold?),

wrapping gifts elegantly (does anyone else like gift bags?), taking a great holiday photo where everyone looks good, finding the right gift or the right tree, or writing a Christmas letter that will impress. For pastors, we may be thinking about how to make Christmas Eve just right. Maybe it means keeping family members from fighting or trying to keep the peace when everyone gets together.

Perhaps we don't want to disappoint our family or friends, but maybe there's also a desire to control the situation, too. As we planned for this series, someone said, "control is cover." That's a powerful statement. A facade of control tries to cover where we feel inadequate or insecure. Sometimes we're trying to cover or avoid what's really difficult. Control can also be about power over others.

But that desire for control can damage our relationship with God and each other. The Creation story in Genesis even lifts up humanity's desire for control as a reason for our continuing struggle. God gives Adam and Eve freedom in the Garden, but does give some boundaries. Their desire for control pushes the boundaries and breaks the rules God set, and so they blame others when God questions them.

Our desire for control directly affects our relationship with God and each other. We're called to exercise self-control (that's a fruit of the Spirit), but so many times, we want control over others and want everything to go our way. And we're good at calling our control issues in others, but not so much with ourselves. We want to make the rules. We forget that God wants the best for us and calls us to let go of control and let God lead.

It's not a new problem - or a new call from God. That's what John the Baptist was doing as he made a way for Jesus. If we're willing to listen to him, then we have to look at ourselves in light of Jesus' coming into the world - seeing what I need to do or not do to prepare for him. I have to confront my sin and take on God's values of justice and love.

It means letting go of control and letting God lead. When I asked Brandi about what it means to her to be baptized, she said it's a way for her to say that she wants to follow God and wants God to help her make decisions. What a statement about control!

John's message was "Prepare the way!" John is the one whom the prophet Isaiah spoke about - that voice crying in the wilderness, and he is a "wild man" of sorts. We don't quite know what to do with him when we meet him each Advent, and he calls us to get ready. He's more like the guy we might avoid, yelling on the street corner, than one we'd stop and pay attention to.

People get ready and prepare the way! But not by buying gifts, planning get-togethers, preparing food, baking goodies, or cleaning up for guests. Not by meeting others' expectations, but by opening our hearts to the coming of the One who will save.

We live with hope as we seek God in Advent. We want the peace and joy of Christmas, but we can't experience that fully without looking at ourselves and preparing ourselves to receive Jesus again. There's a line in "O Little Town of Bethlehem" - "where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in." How do we become "meek souls" who can receive Christ?

It doesn't matter who we are or what we've done or not done. Each of us stands in need of a Savior. That's where we need to start. We need to repent - to turn from sin and turn toward God.

Repentance isn't about putting ourselves down. It's about being who God calls us to be. We turn from sin that keeps us separated from God, and we find freedom and peace. We find hope and joy. Writer Frederick Buechner says, "True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying, 'Wow!'" I love that explanation - not getting bogged down in the past, but looking to the future with hope for what God will do.

"When you're longing for things to be different and waiting for it to happen," then your life reflects what Advent is. That's where Charlie Brown is - he's longing to feel differently and find true meaning. Today we hear John - even before Jesus is fully on the scene - pointing to Jesus as Messiah - the One they've waited for.

So what would it mean for us to stop and listen - and even to accept John's message? First, we have to let God be God. John isn't the one we expect, and yet God works through people we don't expect. John is in the wilderness and calls people to repent - to make a change in order to move closer to God - but change is not something we usually want to do.

John's work is to prepare the way so that people will receive Jesus. We remember those who prepared our way to faith in God. Each of us has been encouraged by many different people: a parent or a family member, a teacher, a mentor, a co-worker, a church member, a pastor, a friend, a caregiver, or another special person. Whoever it might be, when we celebrate and give thanks for them, we remember the power of community. We see the circle that includes people from all walks of life and faith. And we're reminded that God uses us to prepare the way for others.

John the Baptist confronts us about our need for control. We don't control the way that God works. We don't earn our salvation by being right or doing right. We receive salvation as a gift of God because of God's grace. John's role is a prophet who tells us where we are, where God wants us to be, and then drives God's Word in between.

But John is clear about his role - he is the pointer. He's focused on humility – not being well known or famous – but pointing others to Jesus. He even says that he's not worthy to untie Jesus' sandals, which was a job for the lowliest servant.

It's time to get right with God. His goal is to turn people from sin and turn them toward Jesus Christ. He baptizes with water for cleansing, but it's no match for the power of the Holy Spirit that will come upon the people. It's no match for the Word of God - Jesus - who will come and fully reveal God's grace and mercy - even to the cross.

So we face a decision - whether to accept John's message to get ready for Jesus or not. We can ignore John. We can keep on grasping for control and trying to make it alone. Or we can acknowledge our struggle for control and our need for God's help.

We can take time to focus on our relationship with God and nurture our faith in ways that keep us grounded in God's love. We can give control back to God and allow God to order our lives in grace.

Today you received a gift tag. What will you offer God in this season? This is from you to God. ***I will let go of control by...or I will point others to Jesus by...*** This is yours to fill out and keep. Feel free to put it in your prayer journal or somewhere else where you'll see it every day. What will you give to God this year? How will you let God lead? How will point others to Jesus through your words and actions?

May God help us and lead us. Let us pray...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE