

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“The Force is Awakening: Act”

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Zephaniah 3:14-20, Luke 3:7-18

We have a count-down in our household. We mark each day as it gets closer. There is non-stop talk about this coming event. Ideas about what it will be like; plans for when and where it will take place; expressions of hope. Our home is bursting at the seams with anticipation.

There are 5 days left on our count-down.

Yes, I'm aware that Christmas is still 12 days away. But in our house, we're counting down to opening day of the new Star Wars movie.

Our dinner table discussions are filled with talk of possible plot lines, new droids and other characters, and how much money Disney is going to make off of this thing.

Now, John, the cousin of Jesus, has a count-down of his own. He's been travelling throughout the region around the Jordan River, calling people to prepare for an epic event, the salvation of the world.

And now his fans have begun flocking to the river to be baptized by him.

Filled with excitement and anticipation, talking about their hopes and possibilities, re-hashing the prophetic prequels to this event to predict possible new plot lines – the people come out into the wilderness to be baptized.

Now, this baptism wasn't the kind where you sprinkle water on a sweet baby's head and walk it down the aisle to welcome it into the family of God. The gospel of Luke tells us this was a baptism of repentance. Now, in the first century, there were different kinds of baptism. The Jewish practices related to a ritual bath called a mikvah included various sorts of cleansing, typically around the life-cycle or life transitions. There were cleansing rituals related to sacrifice, and later on, a kind of immersion ritual for conversion to the Jewish faith. The baptism that is later taken up in Christianity incorporates many of these ideas along with cleansing from sin and rising to new life in Christ.

But the baptism John is proclaiming is a public act of repentance. It demands more than a desire to be cleansed, purified, and saved. It doesn't promise the privileges of membership in God's family. This baptism is simply an opportunity to tell the world that you have failed to live up to God's expectations.

So why would anybody want to do this? Why are people flocking to the desert to participate in an act of public repentance? It doesn't really sound like a party to me.

The people weren't expecting a party.

The people knew the count-down clock was ticking. The cords of tension holding their community, their families, their government together were going to snap. It was only a matter of time. John's invitation to preparation through repentance would have spoken right to their hearts. Something was about to happen. Perhaps some final and epic battle. And they wanted to be ready. And part of being ready meant owning up to how unprepared they really were.

So they flock to the wilderness, and John starts shouting at them, calling them names and sneering at their confidence. And we think he's lost it. "Who told you to flee from the wrath to come?" YOU did, John!

But if we think of this in terms of that preparation for battle, this is not unlike Henry V's St. Crispin's Day speech or the coach in the locker room before the big game. Henry tells his men they are losers for wanting to have more troops from England rather than the honor of going into battle outnumbered five-to-one. My husband can tell you all the names he was called by football coaches during "motivational" pre-game talks. John the Baptist doesn't let the people rest on their laurels as children of Abraham any more than Ron Rivera will let the Carolina Panthers revel in their 11-0 record when they play this afternoon. All this business about broods of vipers and axes at the root of the tree is John's attempt to get people pumped up and ready for the main event.

And it clearly works, because the people ask to review the playbook. They want to know what they should do.

And his response is akin to Yoda's words to Luke Skywalker: "Do. Or do not. There is no try."

Don't try to repent; don't try to be a better person; don't try to live the way God calls us to live.

Do. Or do not. But quit talking about it, thinking about it, arguing about it. It's not that complicated, according to John.

If you have two coats, give one away. If you have food, you should share it. Tax collectors should be honorable tax collectors. Soldiers should be honorable soldiers.

John the Baptist is like the Yoda of the New Testament, training and preparing the people to encounter the Force that is Jesus Christ.

OBI-WAN KENOBI defines "The Force" as "an energy field" that "surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together." I think this works fairly well as an analogy for the Messiah John is anticipating. The Force that is coming with a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire to winnow the wheat from the chaff and burn away the chaff – that Force surrounds us and penetrates us and binds the galaxy together.

That Force knows our hearts and minds and motivations. That Force sustains us and empowers us and encourages us. And that Force will not fail to strip away our protective barrier of chaff and burn it up. It will tear down our walls and dissolve our divisions to bind the galaxy together.

So what then should we do?

Once we get to this question, this is one of the easiest passages to translate into 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity.

If you have more than you need, give what is extra to those who need it.

Be honorable in your business dealings.

Don't abuse your power.

Do. Or do not. There is no try.

The Force is Awakening in our world. Not with a Star Wars movie. Not with an epic battle or final show down.

The Force of Jesus Christ is awakening in each and every act of generosity and compassion. Each coat given away and each meal shared with someone in need. The Force of Jesus Christ is awakening in each and every act of justice, in each decision to do the right and honorable thing. The Force of Jesus Christ is awakening in each and every act of restraint and self-control, in satisfaction with what we have.

The count-down has begun. Not on November 1 when they started playing Christmas carols on the radio. Not on December 1 when the little doors filled with chocolate started opening on Advent calendars.

The count-down started 2,000 years ago, with a man in the wilderness, calling us to repentance, calling us to admit how far we've gone down the wrong path and to change our ways. Calling us to see every extra coat, every scrap of food we throw away, every little bit we skim off the top, every gripe about our paycheck as chaff in need of threshing and burning, as fruitless branches in need of pruning.

The count-down continues. It continues until Christ comes in final victory, until the Force finally binds the galaxy together – all nations and all people together, and God living among them.

We are invited, especially in this season of Advent, to live in joyful anticipation of this final redemption. Human history may seem like a never-ending series of sequels and prequels to the Jesus epic, and in a way, it is. But we live in hope that the next one will be the best episode ever, maybe even the final one.

While we wait, while we live in the count-down, we are called to act. To act with generosity, justice, and compassion. So this week, you are invited to continue participating in our Visual Advent project, taking photos of people acting in the world in ways that prepare us for the Force of Jesus Christ to awaken in our lives and in the world. You can text or email your photos to me, or post them on social media.

And as we go throughout our lives this week, may the Force of Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.