

God Comes Home 3: *Household Renovations*

By
The Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet
From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

December 15, 2024

Luke 3:7-18

⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even 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.”

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” ¹¹In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?”

¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgements against you,
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷ The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you* in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing

¹⁸ as on a day of festival.*

I will remove disaster from you,*
so that you will not bear reproach for it.

¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.

And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.

²⁰ At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.

Elaine Pagels is an American historian of religion. Her book, *Beyond Belief*¹, traces the beginnings of the Christian faith in a very personal way. She admits she started out a religious skeptic and approached her work with an academic's objectivity. She had been suspicious of credal affirmations that imposed a system of doctrines about belief but with little traction in how people live. That is – until a horrible tragedy affected her life when her young son, was diagnosed with an incurable illness. Mark was born with a hole in his heart which caused life-threatening pulmonary hypertension. Anyone who knows what it's like to have a seriously ill child knows that overwhelming feeling of anxiety and grief that never seems to lift.

One chilly winter Sunday morning she went jogging in Manhattan and, needing to warm herself, she slipped inside the vestibule of an Episcopal church. She listened to the hymns and prayers and found herself thinking, “Here is a community that knows how to deal with this tragedy in my life.” That Sunday morning pause at the edge of worship caught the dispassionate academic by surprise. Something clicked, and her abstract scholarship regarding the history of religion opened up a faithful curiosity.

She began looking at how the practice of Christianity had changed through the years. She wrote: “How is it that Christianity lost that ‘spacious moral vision’ in a few centuries? How is it that being a Christian became virtually synonymous with accepting a certain set of beliefs? Christianity had survived persecution and flourished for centuries before Christians formulated what they believed into creeds. Early Christianity survived because Christians were doing something new in the world, something no one had ever seen. They were loving their neighbors, not just their family, clan, or tribe. Not even just their fellow Christians, but others, strangers, outsiders, Gentiles, pagans,

¹ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, p. 5-9.

Romans. “From the beginning what attracted outsiders who walked into a gathering of Christians, as I did on that February morning, was the presence of a group joined by spiritual power into an extended family. Many must have come, as I did, in distress.” They did remarkable, unprecedented things,” she says. “They contributed money to a common fund to pick up orphans abandoned to die on the streets of Rome and in the garbage dumps. They took food to prisons and stayed behind when the plagues struck, to minister to the sick and dying because Jesus told them to love God by loving their neighbors. She concludes: ...Early Christians believed that their God, who created humankind, actually loved the human race and evoked love in return.”

This is why – I believe – in the wisdom of all four gospels, you cannot get to Jesus without going through his wild and wooly cousin John. As we prepare our homes and hearts for the coming of God, John meets us in the wilderness of our days saying, God is about to do a new thing in human history; into the human family God is coming to make a home. And that homecoming requires some household renovations. It’s time to take seriously the ethical implications of the reign of God upon the earth.

With urgency in his voice, John shouts the long-awaited Messiah is coming, repent, turn around from your old ways. Turn toward the coming of God by living the values God has placed before you of loving God by loving neighbor. John calls them venomous snakes, dangles visions of hellfire before them, and challenges them to change. Amazingly, instead of walking away from his harsh rhetoric, they asked for more, “What should we do?” they asked. John gave them simple, practical advice: Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has enough food do the same. Tax collectors came to be baptized and John said to them, Do your work honestly, without skimming so much off the top for yourself. To soldiers, John said, Live with integrity honoring those whom you serve.

To everyone he said, Bear the fruit worthy of repentance, and then he added, Don't say to yourselves, "we have Abraham as our ancestor," which is a way of saying, "No one is grand-fathered in! We remember the promise God made to Abraham: *I will bless you and your descendants, and they will be a blessing until all the families of the earth will be blessed.* According to John, each generation is called anew to these ethical demands: Share what you have, treat people fairly, and live in such a way that others may simply live. If you have more food and clothing than you need, share them. Do your work with integrity and without exploiting other people.

John's practical, ethical wisdom reminds us of what Elaine Pagels found in the early history of Christianity that serving others is never on the sideline of the Christian faith; it is the essence of what we believe. Every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, and everything we do should promote human flourishing for everyone.

Since we moved to Bryn Mawr, many of you know, my husband Larry has worked with the non-profit Project HOME. Founded 35 years ago, to end street homelessness, and create affordable, supportive housing in Philadelphia, you could say the work of Project HOME is based on John's call to a Christian ethic. A while back Larry came home with the story of an encounter he and Joan McConnon, one of the co-founders of Project HOME, had outside of the Ruth Williams House. On North Broad Street near Temple University. That residence had been completed two years earlier with eighty-eight efficiency apartments. While Joan and Larry had been waiting on the sidewalk for someone coming to a meeting, a resident came out of the building and walked up to them. She said she recognized them from when the building first opened because Larry and Joan were on site every day back then, setting up offices, apartments, mailboxes.

“I remember the two of you from back then,” she said, “and I have been looking for people to thank.” Then she told them her story. “I had a hard time growing up. It was just my mom and me, and my mom, well... she was not a very good person. She did the best she could, I guess, but it was always hard and she got involved with the wrong people. I needed a mom back then, but she never had the time. If I really pushed her, she would often tell me I was no good or worthless. Not worth her time. Eventually, I guess I began to believe it too. And I fell into the same paths she did. I ended up on the streets. Not all the time, but on and off for about ten years. In one of my worst periods, a Project HOME outreach worker talked me into leaving the streets, and getting help. I resisted the help. I was sure it was a scam. But I saw these workers come by every day, and even at night, and when I was so sick and tired I thought I might die, I gave them a chance. The struggle wasn’t easy, but I lived in a group home and met regularly with people who offered help.

After a year or so, a Project HOME worker told me I should apply for an apartment in a new building opening later that year, so with her help I filled out the application. And I was accepted. I couldn’t believe it. I tried not to get my hopes up. I was sure that it would fall through. On moving day, we went to orientation and then up to our apartments with keys. There was a big bright bow on the door, and when I opened the door, I burst into tears. In all my years I had never even dreamed about having my own place. I think I believed what my mother and my life on the streets had told me -- you aren’t worth anything. For weeks, maybe even months, I was sure I would have to move again. But now, after two years of living here, I realize this is home. My neighbors even asked me to serve on a residents committee that helps plan dinners and special events for the other residents. all I want to do is make sure I thank the people who helped make this happen, and to let other people know that things can get better, they are worth something.”

You are worth something, John said, as people came out to the river to be baptized. *Bear the fruit worthy of repentance*. Get ready for the coming of God by getting your spiritual, ethical house in order! Love your neighbor in tangible, life-saving ways. Share what you have with those who do not have enough to live. Be the blessing of the children of God until all the families of the earth are blessed.