

Second Sunday after Advent—December 4, 2016  
St Mark's Episcopal Church  
Matthew 3:1-12  
Preacher: The Reverend Dr Clint Moore III

I would like everyone  
Or at least every family

To pick up a Book of Common Prayer

Turn to the top of page 305

Set the book aside and save it for later

The knot was secure—and the loop slid easily along the length of the rope

I pulled the loop back—forming a large opening

I grasped the loop and the rope between my small five-year-old fingers

Twirled it over my head several times—then let it fly at my target

A cow's head stared back at me from across the pasture

Actually it wasn't really a cow's head

It was a large block of wood that the guys at the warehouse  
Had drawn a cow's face on

Further, it wasn't in the pasture  
But rather in our back yard

This was the life a young boy in East Texas  
Especially if he wasn't in school yet

Now I can truly say that we lived in the middle of nowhere

Because where we lived was not even on the map

Or at least that is what my Dad always said

Our house was one of eight in this small community  
We were separated from the highway by a ridge

On the other side of that ridge was a Gulf service station  
With the old orange sign

They also had suckers to match the sign

If your child was in the car when you bought gas  
He or she would get a sucker

It was obviously an orange flavored sucker

But I am still not sure what the blue Gulf stamped in the sucker  
was made out of—and not sure I ever want to know

There was also a general store—  
Where you could buy just about anything except food

For that—my mother would have to drive about two hours each way  
To the Piggly Wiggly in Kilgore

And as we all know—  
Kilgore is the home of the world-famous Kilgore Rangerettes

Well—at least they were famous in Kilgore  
On our side of the ridge, East Texas stretched out flat as a tabletop

There were about a thousand horses  
And probably five thousand head of cattle

In case you didn't know—  
head of cattle—is cowboy talk

Mixed in among the horses and cattle were hundreds of oil wells

These wells were owned and operated  
by the company for which my Dad worked

The warehouse across the street—  
where the other men in the community worked  
supported and maintained those wells

But all this brings me back to my practice steer

You see—if I was going to be anything in East Texas

I was going to be a cowboy

And to do that—I needed to be able to rope

I could already ride by the time I was four years old

Of course—I was only allowed to ride in the back yard

A friend of my Dad's had made a saddle to fit me

And I watched intently—following every movement of his hands

Watching how he positioned the saddle blanket

Paying attention to how he gently but firmly cinched the saddle  
And buckled the bridle

I must say that while it was a complicated process  
Our Great Dane did not complain one bit

While riding would clearly be a prerequisite for a cowboy  
And riding a very large dog was a good start

I figured that roping was more important  
And so I returned to my lasso

After many tries—I was finally able to properly rope my cow

The loop tightened—as I pulled the rope tight

My fake cow literally broke into pieces

Perhaps I had pulled too hard

Perhaps I needed a better touch with the rope

Or perhaps—just perhaps

I was ready

Could it be?

Could it truly be that I was ready to rope?

The next morning I reported bright and early  
To the warehouse across the street

The guys put me in the back of their pickup truck  
With lasso in hand.....off we went to check the wells

At one of the wells—a calf had become mesmerized  
By the circular motion of the counterweights

We called these pumping units “Rocking Horses”

The pumping rod was pulled up and down  
By a beam that was moved by a series of arms and bearings  
Driven by an electric motor

But the constant speed of the beam’s motion  
Was maintained by a set of large weights  
That swung around the side of the unit

In any case—the presence of a calf  
Also meant there was a momma cow nearby

The guys could not check the well  
With momma blocking the entrance to the unit.

This was actually a common occurrence  
In a land where cows and oil wells mix

So the guys backed the pickup as close to the calf as they could get  
Without its mother threatening to butt the truck

Then—the moment of truth was at hand

With one end of the lasso securely tied to the truck's trailer hitch  
And the other end in my shaking hand  
I started the twirl I had practiced in the back yard

The rope whipped through the air over my head

And then I let the lasso go

There was a moment of anticipation as the lasso  
Flew directly toward the calf

And then it happened

The loop fell perfectly around the calf's head

I pulled the roped tight and the truck moved forward slowly  
Dragging the roped calf away from the well

Life was good

I could ride

I could rope

My life as a cowboy was within my reach

But at five years old—I felt like my life was over....

I had run home to tell Mom and Dad  
About my successful day—roping the calf

There were boxes everywhere

My parents said we would be moving

While I am sure they told me where we would move  
I didn't hear it

The only thing I understood  
Is that we would be leaving East Texas

But what about my riding?  
And more importantly—what about my roping?

They surely didn't have cowboys there  
Wherever "there" was

How could they do this?  
What right did they have to change my life like this?

It just didn't make any sense to me

Perhaps this is same thought which crossed the minds of  
those who came out to see John

You have a throng of folks who come to be baptized  
By John the Baptist—the wild and crazy guy of God

He tells people that they must make a change

They must change the way they live

But John does not stop there

He tells those gathered in that place  
And also those gathered in this place

That baptism demands more than just donating  
To the food pantry  
Or the coat drive  
Or your church  
Or our companion diocese  
Or the Appalachia project

John reminded them—

And now reminds us

That living into our baptism

Demands an understanding of change

That is integral to who we are as children of God

Now an acceptance of that change is at times

More difficult for us as human beings

Many of us—myself included

Frequently become comfortable

Satisfied

Even invested.....in the direction in which our life is going

John's demand for change

May come at a time that is.....

Unwanted

Inconvenient

And even upsetting

That demand for change

May push or pull us in directions that cause us to explore the closets of our lives

Closets we would rather not enter

For most of us—including myself

Change can be painful

Change at times—just doesn't make sense

Which is why I am confused by the throng

Gathered to be baptized by John

He tells them that each of them must  
Suffer  
Endure  
Encounter—a life change

A change that goes far beyond just how they act  
But truly a change in who they are  
And who they are becoming

And yet having been told this—they are filled with expectations  
The expectation that John is possibly the Messiah

I can truthfully tell you that when my parents  
Told me we were leaving East Texas

The first thought that came to my mind

Was NOT—is one of them the Messiah?

Now I have to admit

That occasionally—I will make a change in something at home  
Or have one of my bicycle projects spread across the room

And upon seeing it....my wife will mistake me for “Jesus Christ!!!”  
Or even “God Almighty!!!”

Now perhaps it’s the beard!!!!

But I usually just respond in my most humble voice....  
“No....merely God’s humble servant”

But let’s not forget that while John is certainly pointing us  
Toward a spiritual change

Such change also has a powerful emotional component  
That engages our expectations and even our concern  
Of what is to come

It can also bring an element of grief  
Over what has been lost

Now don't get me wrong

I am not saying that somehow

We should just always 'go with the flow'  
So as attempt to avoid such grief

Because that does not allow us  
To question the future  
Nor to honor the past

What I am saying is this.....

Think of all the persons who have had a part  
In helping you become the person you are today

I would hazard to say that very few—if any of those persons

Ever told you—"Just be happy with where you are."

"Whatever you do—don't change"

"Resist it"

"Fight it"

Honoring the place of those persons in our lives

Calls each one of us to find our way  
Individually  
But more importantly—collectively

To embrace the opportunities that change might provide

Should we forget the way life was?—Never

Because that past is always the foundation  
On which the future is built

Does it all make sense?

I am not sure

But demanding that this world make sense in our minds  
May be an overwhelming task

Tell me what makes sense about a world  
In which so many are hungry  
Or homeless  
Or Hopeless

And yet politicians are fighting over  
Whose hands should be on the steering wheel  
As we drive toward God knows what

Tell me what make sense about a world  
In which our children are being killed  
In the streets and in their schools

And yet some people are telling us to write laws  
That will allow all citizens  
To carry concealed guns

Tell me what makes sense about a world  
In which those who are labeled as immigrants or refugees  
Are denied sanctuary

And some are even demanding that we identify those persons  
And create lists so that we can track their whereabouts and movements

Tell me what makes sense about a world  
In which persons are still not allowed to marry the person they love  
And are told that they are somehow second class citizens

Tell me what makes sense about a world?  
Well—you get the idea

So let me tell you what makes sense

I would like everyone to pick up the Book of Common Prayer

Again—turn to the top of page 305

Now join me in answering the following questions

Will you proclaim by word and example, the Good News of God in Christ?

I will, with God's help.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons—

Loving your neighbor as yourself?

I will, with God's help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people,

And respect the dignity of every human being?

I will, with God's help.

Then there is only one thing left to say at this time

Of expectation and change

Of grief and hope

Of past—present—and future

Yes—there's only one thing left to say.....

Giddyup!