

**December 13, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service**

**TEXT: [Luke 3:1–6, 23–38](#)**

**TITLE: In Praise of Older Siblings**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

I have an older brother: Richard Carter Bush. He's four years older than me; he lives in Kansas City with his wife Kim and near to his daughter, stepchildren, and grandkids. I'm not sure what he thought when a little brother appeared on the scene, usurping from him the attention he'd received as an only child up until then. I also have a younger sister, Amy, who is part of our family too, and who is likely grateful that this morning my focus is only on older siblings.

My older brother Rick is a great guy. He is the rare dad who signs up to be the parent host at school holiday parties; a guy who loves toys, gadgets, and fireworks; someone who can fix almost anything and talk to literally anybody. Because we were four years apart, we were never in the same school at the same time. But he paved the way for me nonetheless. I would follow him around, wishing I had a cool mini-bike like he did, watching as he took apart and souped up his Dodge Charger, as he got his first job at a gas station, as he went off to college, married and moved away. So many things have changed in my life—going to college and seminary, getting married, having kids, pastoring churches in Africa, Wisconsin, and now Pittsburgh. But one thing hasn't changed: I'm still a younger brother to my older brother Rick.

Many of you are either older siblings yourself or have an older brother or sister. Even if you are an only child, there is likely someone whom you looked up to as a type of older sibling, or someone for whom you fulfilled that role. We are all branches on some sort of family tree. There are always others who've gone before us—parents, grandparents, great-grandparents; the famous aunts, the oddball uncles, the crazy cousins. Yet each of us is creating stories others will tell someday. You are an important part of the big picture. Never forget that.

Almost every Advent season we spend some time talking about John the Baptist, because in many ways he is an older sibling, an older relative to Jesus. Jesus didn't just appear one day out of the blue. He was born into a family, into a particular place and time that was directly connected to the life of John the Baptist. You heard how Luke 3 opens with a powerful Who's Who list: Emperor Tiberius, Governor Pilate, King Herod ruler of Galilee, his brother Philip ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and the Jerusalem high priests Annas and Caiaphas. This list starts big with the Roman emperor and eventually focuses in on the household of an older couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. Elizabeth is related to Mary. And when both of them surprisingly turn out to be pregnant, they meet and their family stories more closely intertwine. Soon Elizabeth would give birth to a son named John, who grew into a prophet preaching in the wilderness and baptizing beside the river Jordan. Mary would also give birth to a son, who knew of John's ministry, was baptized by him in the Jordan, and would be called a prophet and child of the Most High God. Two young men—two prophetic voices crying out for justice—two martyrs who would be arrested by those in power whose names we

heard earlier. Yet John's and Jesus' works far outlasted those of Herod, Pilate or Emperor Tiberius.

You can know about me without knowing about my older brother Rick or my father Frank Richard, or my grandfather and so on, but much of my story is tied up with my family's stories. In the same way, you can know about Jesus without learning about John, or the family tree John and Jesus share, but you'll miss out on a lot of important details. We are all part of a larger story and the actions we take shape that story for good or for ill, with the effects of our lives rippling down through the generations.

Martin Luther King had a good analogy for this. In his book Where Do We Go From Here?, King described how a famous novelist died, and among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories. One idea on his list said this: A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together. King thought this was a perfect analogy for humankind. He said we've inherited a global house in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Protestant and Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist—a family long separated by ideas, cultures, language and religion now forced to live together in one house, to be part of one story.<sup>1</sup>

The word “family” may have an “I” in the middle of it, but no family can ever be defined only by the “I” in the center—not in our literal families nor in the global family. That is not a pious moral statement; it is a pragmatic truth. Wherever the coronavirus originated and however it came to America, it is something that all of us in this global house must deal with together. Wherever there are stockpiles of weapons—chemical, nuclear, technological—all of us are at risk. When we talk about climate change and the ways we are destroying the environment upon which all life depends, we rely on the science of ecology. Yet realize that the word itself—oecologie—comes from the Greek word for household—“oikos.” The science itself refers to the fact that all earth's creatures great and small dwell together like a family sharing a single house.<sup>2</sup>

Not only do we live together now, our lives are constantly impacted by those who've gone before us. This includes close family members, like how I learned a positive work ethic from my brother. But we also are impacted by relative strangers who pass through our lives at pivotal moments. Pope Francis recently wrote an essay about our need to come together as we deal with the Covid pandemic. He issued a call to move from self-absorption to embracing bonds of solidarity with others, insisting even random acts of compassion can change lives forever. To illustrate this, he told about being deathly ill while a young priest in his 20s. He was hospitalized and struggling to breathe. They removed part of one of his lungs and he spent time on a ventilator. Francis credits his recovery to one nurse who was a Dominican sister. A doctor had just examined him, but after he left, this wise angel of mercy told the nurses to double the doses of antibiotics the old doctor had prescribed. From her experience she could see Francis was dying unless strong intervention occurred. As he put it, that nurse understood better than the doctor what was needed and she had the courage to act on her knowledge for the sake of a young priest—one who later became pope.<sup>3</sup>

Pope Francis chose to tell his own story by including how a Dominican nurse saved his life. Martin Luther King, Jr., chose to tell our national story about racial justice by reminding us that we live together in one global house. Luke, the evangelist, chose to tell the story of God's love for this world by grounding the story of Jesus in the concrete realities of human history—by listing off a genealogy that connected Christ the Savior with ancestors going all the way back to King David, Father Abraham, even Adam and Eve of long ago. Luke also knew that to understand who Jesus was, his story would need to be prepared by someone else's story. And so before we heard Jesus' voice, John the Baptist got our attention. Before Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," John cried out in the wilderness about making the crooked straight and bear fruits of justice, compassion, and peace for all to see. Jesus needed an older sibling. Not that John was meant to be the Messiah or that his light needed to shine as brightly as Christ's. Yet by his actions—his witness and words and baptism washings—John prepared the way for who was to come.

For whom are you preparing the way? For whom are you a beloved, necessary, critically important older sibling? There's a reason the bible contains stories about people like John the Baptist and long genealogies listing the ancestors who proceed us. We often think about eternity as everlasting time going forward. But eternity also includes time going backwards. That genealogy of Jesus', inasmuch as we follow Jesus, is now part of our genealogy. Adam & Eve, Abraham and Sarah, David, Joseph the supposed father of Jesus—their story is now part of ours. We are the continuation of this same story as it extends into the future. Their legacy continues in us. We are responsible to the ancestors, to all the elder siblings who prepared our way.

Christian ethicist Bruce Birch put it this way: "The past is not only not dead, it is not yet finished. The faith community is charged to carry forward the hopes of the ancestors and the dreams of their God, and to realize those hopes and dreams (by God's grace) as best it can.<sup>4</sup> You are part of the Christmas story – part of the family tree of faith, the genealogy that goes through Jesus back to Adam. You are also an elder sibling, a John the Baptist, a preparer of the way for someone who will follow you. You've already been added to long list of history past and history yet to come. Go now; prepare the way of the Lord.

AMEN

---

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go From Here?, quoted in Larry Rasmussen's Earth Community, Earth Ethics, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Andrea Wulf, The Invention of Nature, p. 307.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, "A Crisis Reveals What Is in Our Hearts," *New York Times*, November 29, 2020, SR 3.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Birch, The Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life, p. 131.