

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church  
Rio Rancho, NM

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Rev. Frank Yates

## STANDING ON THE BRIDGE

Luke 3: 7-18

Take an imaginary journey with me this morning. Let's drive down the hill on Alameda to the bridge over the Rio Grande. Imagine cars parked everywhere and hundreds of people standing on the bridge. It has all the ambiance of the Ballon Fiesta, but it's not October. It's December 15, just nine shopping days before Christmas. So out of curiosity you park your car and walk out onto the bridge.

It's a motley crew gazing down into the muddy waters of the Rio Grande. Nobody will tell you what is going on. To your repeated questions, they simply say, "See for yourself." Soon you find an opening on the railing. You look down into the river and you see finally what the hubbub is all about. You're taken aback. It's John the Baptist.

He's come in from the outback to the outskirts of town. He's back, as he is every Advent. Once again John has waded ankle deep into the water and he's preaching that same ole fire and brimstone. John doesn't care much to preach in churches with hard floors. John much prefers a soggy bottom. So he's down there below the Alameda bridge with a voice as big as all outdoors.

It's unmistakable what he's proclaiming: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord!" It's a message that unsettles you and yet tugs at your heart. This is a clarion call that cuts like a laser into a cataract. It's a commotion that stops traffic on the Alameda bridge. And there you are standing on the bridge, and you simply cannot turn away.

That strangely dressed man down there in the mud is an unrelenting "Johnny One Note". "Repent, for the kingdom of God has drawn near." Repent! Change your attitudes, your thoughts, your ways. Because a new day is dawning and there's a train a-coming. To get on that Gospel train, you must change. Get a new heart, a new mind, a new outlook. If you want to get on board, then get ready, people, get ready!

Then you notice a stirring in the crowd on the bridge. Someone shouts down to John, “How do we get ready? How can we change?” And John shouts back, “Come on down, wade in the water. Confess your sins and wash them away. Cleanse yourself of your old ways and habits. Get an attitude adjustment down here in the river. And you will be forgiven and freed. And then you will be ready for that train that’s a-coming.”

Someone on the bridge shouts back, “You really want us to come down into the water?” “That’s right”, shouts John, “come on down right now whoever you are.” And come down they do. By the hundreds. They hurry to the end of the bridge and wade into the waters. Some of the young people just jump off the bridge. Thankfully no one is hurt. Ah, you think, youth is wasted on the young.

So you begin wondering and ask yourself, “Is this cheap grace?” You know your theology. Is that all there is? Just slog out into the waters to be baptized and then everything will be just fine? Surely there is more to it than that. Soon you learn there is much more to it.

Right then you hear a rustling in the crowd. People are moving back from the railing on the bridge. They are making way for an entourage, some dressed in robes. It’s the religious leadership from town. They heard about John on the news. They’ve come to take a closer look, perhaps a critical look. But to your astonishment John doesn’t even give them a chance. He shouts out, “You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” John turns them away as intruders into his baptismal party. He sees their sense of entitlement and hypocrisy and dismisses them as irrelevant.

As you ponder what John means, another group saunters up to the railing. They look quite well-dressed. In fact, they look marvelous. They shout down their question, “Hey, John, what should we do?” And John shouts back, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none and whoever has food must do the same.” They stir with discomfort.

Then others make their way to the railing. They are tax collectors and revenue agents. They shout down, “Hey, John, what should we do?” And John shouts back, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Then some soldiers, some kind of militia unit, muscle their way to the railing. They shout down, “Hey, John, what about us?” And John shouts back, “Do not

extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations and be content with your wages.” Looks like John expects more than just a splash in the river.

Finally, a delegation from the government pushes up to the railing. They too shout down to John, who shouts back, “Stop your injustice. And some of you need to take a good hard look at your sexual ethics. You know who you are. Your behavior is scandalous.” One member of the delegation says to another, “The Herods of this world will not be amused. Not at all.” And sure enough they leave in a huff. Could be hard times ahead for John.

You cannot quite see if any of those folks waded down into the water—the religious leaders, the wealthy, the revenue agents, the soldiers and the government officials. All you can see are the hundreds who do want John to wash their sins away, to get them ready for that Gospel train that is a-coming.

You’re standing on the bridge. But you are not sure what to do. You are not easily enticed to wade down in the water. Why? Because you’re Presbyterian. Presbyterians ordinarily prefer to keep their feet dry. Besides, you’ve channel-surfed past religious fanatics on television a million times without the slightest hesitancy. Why would this day on the bridge be any different?

So you stand there, your hands holding tightly to the railing on the bridge. Maybe, just maybe, you are holding on for dear life. The old life you know so well. It’s hard to part with, even if it’s not so great. Even still you feel a pull toward the waters. It’s an unmistakable draw, this summons to a new life, a new attitude, a new heart. Washed, cleaned, renewed, getting ready for a new day that’s dawning.

Then John plays his trump card when someone shouts down, “John, are you the Christ?” . He insists he is not the Christ, because the Christ will be mightier than he. So mighty that John feels unworthy to even untie the thongs of his sandals. John is sure the coming One will separate the wheat from the chaff, the good from the bad. While John’s baptism is with water, the Coming One will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John proclaims the Good News of the coming Christ, who is riding in on that Gospel train.

Now the summons seems deeply personal to you, as though John is somehow singling you out. He wants you to step forward, come down to the waters, get ready for that Christ who is to come. That Christ riding that Gospel train straight into your heart.

I am standing on that bridge between my yesterday and my tomorrow, the old and the new. I hear John's summons for me to wade in and feel the mud on my toes. I am standing on the bridge. What will I do this Advent? What will you do?

“Repent! For the kingdom of God is drawing near!”