

C Advent 3 12.12.21

Luke 3:7-18

Focus Statement: There is work for us that is both easy and impossible, and there is Jesus.

Last week we heard the crazy pronouncement that among the pantheon of movers and shakers like the Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Annas, and Caiaphas, another player was entering the stage and that player was John, Son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. And yes, we'd never heard of John or even Zechariah. Outside of the brief introduction from earlier in Luke of Zechariah as a minor temple priest who was righteous and blameless before God but otherwise unremarkable, until an angel of the Lord appeared and turned Zechariah's life upside down. But the formula used to introduce John cues us in that John stands in the line of the great prophets of old. Prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, even Isaiah, whom Luke quoted as proof of John's legitimacy as a prophet, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord."

This morning we hear what the message that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" is. And what is that powerful message of hope and promise and salvation? "John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers!'" [Pause.] Well now, that turned quickly there, didn't it? Vipers fleeing from the coming wrath is not exactly the warm, fuzzy message of salvation we might have hoped for.

To give you a sense of how this might have felt. There was an English teacher at my high school, Ms. Avery, who was terrifying. She was an incredible English teacher, everyone who went to my high school can write and write well, because of Ms. Avery, but she was also terrifying. Mid 60s, buzz cut, she was an aerobics instructor on the side, we all knew

she could crush us with her bare hands if she wanted to. I was in student government in high school, and one day we needed to pull a student out of Mrs. Avery's class for a project, and no one wanted to go in and interrupt her class, because we were all terrified of her. After listening to us all bicker, Mr. Stewart, also an English teacher, was like, "you guys are ridiculous, Eldra—did I mention that her first name was Eldra—Eldra is not that scary, I'll just do it." Mr. Stewart walked out of our room, across the hall and into Mrs. Avery's, stood in the open doorway for a minute, and then stepped back, slowly closed the door, and walked back into our classroom, shaking. "You didn't mention she was teaching Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God today," he stuttered. Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, for those not up on your eleventh-grade English syllabi, is an essay written by the Reverend Jonathan Edwards during the great revival period of early American literature. And it's, like Ms. Avery, a bit terrifying. "I walked in," Mr. Stewart told us, "As she was reading aloud from the essay. She paused as the door opened, fixed her eyes on me, and continued reading, 'The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you.'" "And then what happened?" We asked. "I left," he said. "I've taught eleventh grade English; I didn't need to hear any more to know I was being dismissed." Moral of the story, John's preaching to the crowd about how they were vipers fleeing wrath, wrought the kind of fear in their hearts as your stereotypical high school English teacher reading aloud from Jonathan Edwards. Sheer, unmitigated terror.

And let's pause here real quick to clarify something. What John was doing here in scaring the living daylights out of everyone, and in some ways what Mrs. Avery did to Mr. Stewart, this was actually good news. This was John caring about the future of the crowd he was

addressing. Because it's not fun to correct someone like that, calling people a brood of vipers is not a great way to win friends. But if someone is doing something wrong, if the thing causing their suffering is them, it's not helpful or caring not to tell them. Think about it, if a child burned their hand touching a hot stove, you wouldn't punish the stove, tell the child the stove had no right to be such a bully and it needed to do better next time. No, right, because that wouldn't help the child not get burned. You'd tell them, stoves are hot, don't touch them. You'd be nicer about it than John, but the point is the same. What John was doing here was getting the people's attention. Letting them know that something was horribly wrong, and they needed to change their behavior.

And it worked! The crowd, toll collectors, even soldiers came to John asking, "What then should we do?" To which John replied, basically, be nice. Actually, nice is really even a stretch here, more like, do what you're supposed to do. These aren't huge asks John made. The one to the crowd was probably the biggest, whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise. Sharing is like preschool level niceness, but even that is more than he commanded of the toll collectors and soldiers. To them, he basically said, just do your job. See the way toll collecting worked was people would bid for the right to collect the tolls, and whoever had the highest bid got the job. They would then pay Rome whatever they had bid and then keep whatever tolls they made. So, like, the toll collector might say to Rome, the toll to cross this bridge is \$2, 10 people will cross the bridge, I'll pay you \$20 to collect the toll. But then, they could turn around and charge, say, \$10 to cross the bridge, and then pocket the remainder. John said, don't do that. Don't fleece the people around you. Charge what the toll is supposed to be. Soldiers,

same thing, John said to them, don't use your power as soldiers to make people give you bonuses. You're paid by your employer, let your pay be enough.

This is not hard stuff. In fact, in the realm of things religious leaders had said people needed to do to get right with God, this is laughably simple from the guy who just called them vipers fleeing from the wrath. The Essenes told them to withdraw from society, the zealots advocated a violent takeover, even their own traditions proposed sacrifice, sackcloth, and ashes. John told them, don't be greedy, show love to your neighbors.

Dear people of God, if you have looked around an incredibly broken world recently and thought everything is horrible and I don't even know where to start, there is absolutely nothing I could possibly do to make a dent in the problems of society, here's your answer. Start small. Start somewhere. Start by giving your extra coat, sharing your extra food, not taking advantage of those around you. Or, in today's vernacular, start by wearing a mask when you go out. Not for yourself, but for others. Start by talking—not judging, not mocking, but talking—openly and honestly to someone about the vaccine, why they might be getting it, why they might not be getting it, listening to their concerns, affirming their thoughts, unpacking misconceptions while recognizing the validity of their choices. Start by speaking up when someone makes a racist joke or comment. Start by not letting yourself get tempted down the social media troll rabbit hole. Start by sending a nice card to your state representative, local government official, or store clerk thanking them for the work that they do. Start by asking questions of those with whom you disagree and listening, really listening to the answers. Not for sound bites to challenge, but for the

concerns behind the words. Start by fact checking your own social media posts to make sure that you yourself have not fallen victim to fake news. Because, I'll be honest, I have. It's easier than you think to get tricked into agreeing with something you already believe to be true, only to discover you didn't have all the information.

Start there. Start small. Start somewhere. There is so much in this world that is outside of our control, that the only thing we really can do is start with the things we can.

Start there knowing that what you can control is small and insufficient and be ok with that. Because here is the real meat of the good news that John came to proclaim: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming."

Dear people of God, this is the message of John, the story of humanity, in a nutshell. We have screwed things up. We have made mistakes, some totally unintentionally, yes, but some one hundred percent in our control. We have done things that have hurt others, have hurt our world, and we must do different, we must be different. The promise of salvation is not people are mean to you, but God's coming to make them stop being mean to you. No, the promise is we, collectively, all of us, have done things, large and small, that are wrong. We, collectively, all of us, must do different, must be different. None of us are immune to mistakes and misbehavior.

So that's part one. We screwed this us. We, all of us, are responsible. Part two is, we, collectively, all of us, have it in our power to do different, to be different. All of us can live

lives of radical reorientation to love and care for our neighbors and our world. These things are not beyond our control, we have it in our power to make changes, to be change.

And, here's the most important part, part three. Part three is "the one more powerful than [us] is coming." Part three is we are not the salvation. Salvation does not depend on us, we are not responsible for its arrival. We have a role to play, but that role is to be the voice of one crying in the wilderness, to be a smoother of rough ways and a straightener of crooked places. Not to fill all the valleys or level all the mountains, but to pick up a shovel and move the earth that we can in the fulfillment of this mission. There is work for us, dear people of God. It is good work, it is sacred work. It is work that is both impossibly hard and well within our grasp. But, most importantly, in the end, while there is work for us, it is work as participants in what God is already doing. For the one more powerful than us is coming. We are but messengers of this good news. Thanks be to God. Amen.