

C Advent 3 12.15.24

Luke 3:7-18

Focus Statement: God calls us to the joy of repentance

At last! Today we get the John the Baptist we all know and love. The yelly one. Last week we heard how “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. [and] He went into all the region proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Today we get to hear what the proclamation calling people to a baptism of repentance sounds like. A message so appealing that people from all walks of life, crowds, tax collectors, even soldiers, left their homes and lives and livelihoods to come to the wilderness to be baptized by John. And what was that moving and transformative and inspiring message? What were these “exhortations [with which John] proclaimed the good news to the people”?

“John 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?’” Because nothing says “get up and go” like describing the people coming to you as a horde of poisonous snakes fleeing in terror in front of a rapidly spreading wildfire. No book on leadership or pastoral counseling has ever recommended such a line to me as a good way to win friends and influence people. Nothing about these words feel moving, inspiring, hopeful, or a sign of this good news that Luke tells us John was proclaiming.

At least, not at first. But the more I sat with it this week the more I started to hear not just why these words might have enticed crowds to come, but how to hear not fear in them but love. Love, and grace, and care, and trust. I started to feel like these words were loving,

precisely because they were so hard and abrasive and judgmental. That their harshness was a sign of their care. Because it's hard to say hard truths to people. It would have been way easier for John to tell the people what they wanted to hear, that they were great and everyone else was terrible. That by following him, by coming to him in the wilderness, they were the only wise and true and good ones, and everyone else was bad. To call them to follow the path of the Essenes, and withdraw entirely from society, create their own lives alone. Or the zealots, and burn everything down so that it could be rebuilt in exactly the way that the zealots thought best. It would have been so much easier for John to have given them, give us, someone else to blame. Everything is terrible and it is their fault, and if you just follow me, we can show them how wrong they are. There's nothing you have to do or change about yourself though, because you are not the problem.

That would have been easier and probably more popular for him to say. Herod, who in the next few verses we find out was not a fan of John's message, would probably have liked it better. But it wouldn't have been honest. It wouldn't have been honest, and there's something so beautifully refreshing, so deeply loving and caring, in the kind of relationship where someone loves you enough to be honest with you. To tell you hard truths you do not want to hear, but know you need to hear. To bring the reality of your broken places to your attention not to lord them over you, but in true care and compassion, because they love you and want you to be the person they know you to be.

That's what John did in the first few verses of this message, and his audience heard it.

Heard his honesty, heard his vulnerability. Heard in his message someone who loved them

enough to tell them the truth about themselves and the lives they were living. Because I think when someone who truly loves us is honest with us, their words don't come as a surprise. We know, in some deep corner of our heart, that they are exactly right, that the thing they are bringing our attention to is real, that they are right.

The people knew John was telling them the truth, and so they asked him, "What then should we do?" And here's one of my very favorite things about John, he answered their question with a clear and specific answer. This NEVER HAPPENS in scripture. Old Testament, New Testament, doesn't matter. No one ever asks God or Jesus a question and gets a clear and straight answer. God is all, "I am who I am." And Jesus, that guy loves a parable. There's a Christian bumper sticker quip that was popular for a while, maybe you've seen it, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." Which is a nice idea in theory, except point out one place in scripture where someone asks God a question about anything, and God answers clearly. It just doesn't happen, God just doesn't work that way. For good reason, I think. The world is too big and vast and complicated, God's kingdom stretching not just across space but across time, for God to give one succinct answer that will work for always. But John, maybe because John was human and not God, does. The people asked him, "What then should we do," and John told them, share your abundance. That's it, it's as simple as that. Share your abundance. You don't need to give away all your coats, but if you have two, give away one. If you have excess food, give out the extra. To the tax collectors, take what is fair, what is necessary for the public services to support the community, but not more than you need. To the soldiers, do your job, don't use your job as an opportunity to exploit others.

We see in John's teaching Luke's understanding of the Kingdom of God as a level place.

Where there is enough to go around to all, because everyone has what they need. Last week we heard the quote from the prophet Isaiah about filling the valleys and making low the mountains and hills. Today we see this was not a topography lesson but an economy lesson.

And beyond answering their question with a concrete task, it's a doable task. That's the other thing about major societal problems. So often we know things are wrong, climate change, gun violence, the refugee crisis, economic inequality, the list goes on, and it feels like there's nothing we can do about it. Sure I recycle, but remember a few years ago when we learned our recycling was so contaminated with non-recyclables, Battle Creek was just throwing it away anyway? I rinse my containers, but I can't rinse all my neighbors as well. My one hunter friend is a responsible gun owner, but his care doesn't make up for so many others who don't. I'm not a CEO making billions while my workers scrape by, and my retirement is invested in some of those inequality making corporations. I do care that stakeholders do well, because it levels my income. It's complicated and tangled, and what do our actions really matter? John said to the crowds coming to them, they do. They do, you do. The simple act of sharing your extra coat matters because it's a step. It's not the solution, but it's a step. It's an act of radical community, sand in the gears of consumerism to say, I have enough and I can share. If everyone one of us does our part, the gears will grind to a halt. But, even if only we do, there is still benefit because that one person who has received that extra coat has experienced, if only for a moment, a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

And from there, John gets to the real good news. That as great as getting to have a clear understanding of what to do is, the thing that makes this good news worth proclaiming is that “the one more powerful” is coming. The one who will judge the world in righteousness. Who will truly level the hills and raise high the valleys, make the rough ways smooth and the crooked ways straight. We have work to do, we are not powerless, but in the end success is not on our shoulders because Jesus is on his way.

Dear people of God, Jesus is coming. In a baby in a manger, in a man in the wilderness, in a death on a cross. Jesus is coming to transform everything. Our work matters because it is part of Jesus’ own work. We are participants in bringing about what is already in motion, what can never be stopped, the unfolding kingdom of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.