

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 12/12/2021



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Third Sunday in Advent

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, December 12th

Luke 3:7-18

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Joy

As we celebrate the third Sunday in Advent, we typically focus on joy - "...good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10) and we light the pink Advent candle. The text from Luke's Gospel delivers a message from John the Baptist which is harsh and consistent within the prophetic tradition. Luke portrays John's message as a radical call to repentance. In the first part of John the Baptist's ministry addressed in last Sunday's lection, we read how John proclaimed a baptism of repentance (Luke 3:1-6). In the second part of this text falling on the Third Sunday in Advent, there are three parts to his message. First, there is a warning of coming judgment and a need to bear fruits in keeping with repentance (v.8). Second, there is ethical exhortation (vv. 10-14). Third, there is messianic expectation (vv.11-18). John's audience has much in common with us. First, they wait expectantly for a coming savior. Second, some seek safety in ritual or their religious status. Third, the people recognize how they have fallen short. The question on the crowd's lips is one that many are asking today: "What then shall we do?"

Luke 3:7-18 Commentary

⁷ He said therefore 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?" ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

John's opening remarks to the crowd is not your typical start to a modern sermon! John's style is in line with the prophetic tradition. He starts off by calling the crowd a "brood of vipers" with viper referring to any number of poisonous snakes that were common in the region. This is perhaps a connection to Genesis 3:15. The people had become the seed of the serpent. Some must have been told that John's baptism was a means to escape the wrath to come. John counters this falsehood by preaching the need for actual repentance which will be evidenced by the fruits such repentance bears. John counters another objection. The people thought their status as children of Abraham would protect them against imminent judgment. John thus redefines here what it means to be a child of Abraham. Ultimately, every tree that does not bear good fruit will see the axe and burn in the fire.

We see the imagery of bearing fruit again in the parable of the barren fig tree (13:6-9). Again, the consequences of not bearing fruit are clear - the axe! Jesus uses the same imagery to refer to the fruits of one's heart: A Tree and Its Fruit (6:43-45) and the Parable of the Sower (8:4-15).

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" ¹¹ And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" ¹³ And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

Not surprisingly, John's challenge to the crowd to live fruitful lives worthy of repentance provokes the question "What then shall we do?" This is the same question the crowd listening to Peter on Pentecost will ask (Acts 2:37). First it is from the crowd in general. John's response is very clear. We are not only to be in a right relationship with God, but we must also strive to be in a right relationship with our neighbors. If we have more than we need we must share with those in need. There is no lack of clarity here. This is not just applicable to the rich. Next, tax collectors and then soldiers ask the same question. Both groups were agents of the Roman government power structure and were known for their abuses of the conquered Jewish people. These abuses perhaps contributed to the poverty of others. John responds by challenging them to do only what is supposed to be done and be content. The message in summary: if you have more than you need, share with others. Do not rob people. Do not abuse authority.

¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

When the crowds wonder if John is the Christ, the Messiah, John is clear that he is not the One. The people will know the Christ has come when He baptizes with the Holy Spirit. This took place at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13). The imagery of coming judgment is vivid. The good is separated from the bad.

¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.

The section closes with a description of what John had been doing in the wilderness – preaching good news (*euangelizō*).

Reflections

John's preaching would not be very popular today! The first four sentences of the text could be paraphrased as, "You spawn of Satan - what makes you think you can come here and escape the coming wrath by merely submitting to the rite of baptism? And don't even think of mentioning you are children of Abraham. Repentance requires a true change in your hearts and mind evidenced by a change in behavior." Although we are on the other side of the cross to John's audience, his criticisms apply to us. Some believe their salvation rests on their church membership or filling out a card some time ago at a Christian camp will not save. There is certainly no easy believism or empty rituals implied in John's message. If John's message was one of, "The Messiah is coming but don't worry about sin, God is love, no repentance needed, get ready by fighting for social justice..." would anyone have actually showed up in the wilderness to listen!

John is clear on the nature of repentance. The economic and social justice components are clearly communicated which is a theme in Luke's Gospel. We are called to share with others and not abuse our authority. How we get money and how we use it are fundamentally spiritual questions and not something that we can ignore or compartmentalize. This message is not just for the rich and powerful! It is also for the people who are preaching social justice.

John does not tell the tax collectors or the soldiers to quit their jobs (if that was even possible back then!), merely to do their jobs appropriately. William Barclay suggests John, by essentially saying let the tax collector be a good

tax collector and let the soldier be a good soldier, is saying that it is our duty to serve God where God has placed us. Barclay claims there is no better place to serve God than in our day's work. This reminds me of a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, [The Michael Angelo of Street Sweepers](#) delivered at New Covenant Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, on April 9th, 1967:

"If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michaelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'"

The consequences of failing to bear the fruits that are worthy of repentance are clear. The tree and axe imagery are compelling. We are called to carry on Christ's earthly ministry and be agents of change in our society; not to wall ourselves off from the world in an exclusive Christian club. There are churches operating today that will no doubt face the axe. While the ultimate fruit is up to the Holy Spirit, we are called to play a part. Not playing is no excuse.

Pursuit of temporal happiness brings only fleeting satisfaction. Joy results from God. Embracing our role as agents of Good News is a source of joy to others as well as a source of our own joy. The Philippians text below is one to meditate upon:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness [or gentleness] be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)



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