

Sermon † December 12, 2021

Luke 3:7-18

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So, what do you think of John's preaching? He's here . . . in our pulpits every year during this Advent season.

Only his pulpit isn't anything like our pulpit. John's pulpit is a patch of sun-baked ground near a cool river.

When we hear him in Matthew and Mark we are given details about his peculiar wardrobe and diet: clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist and his food was locusts and wild honey.

But that is not here in Luke's account of his preaching. For Luke, only one thing matters . . . John's preaching. His is a strong voice filled with conviction. His message: baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John makes no mention of the kingdom of God.

For Luke's Gospel, Jesus is the kingdom preacher. John's preaching doesn't point to the kingdom; it points to Jesus who is the kingdom preacher's.

But there is something else about his voice. It is a voice of urgency and indictment spoken not only to Pharisees and Sadducees but includes all people.

And the people respond, notes Pastor Fred Craddock, "as snakes scurrying before a spreading fire, running to escape 'the wrath to come.'"

What do you think of John's preaching? For me it produces some measure of discomfort. I was taught that preaching was to be, above all else, good news. That people approached worship weary and exhausted seeking refreshment and strength in the sermon to make it through another week.

Preaching that was harsh, moralizing or pulsating with warnings of God's wrath did not belong in the chambers of worship. If the true treasure of the church is the gospel of God's grace, why doesn't John make this his "pitch?"

But here is John with an extended, bony finger swinging an ax with the other hand. John's preaching strips the people down as furniture is stripped of its old finish. He hurls insults on his audience and threatens them with horrifying judgment. His message creates a moment of truth and dissolves any illusion of innocence before God - *any illusion whatsoever*. Maybe that is what John wants to do.

Before the promised Messiah can be received as good news, the crowds must first perceive their need for the Messiah.

There was something about John's preaching that promised life. Different sorts of people were there that day; different faces gathered around this itinerant, desert preacher. Rich people, tax collectors and soldiers.

To most people they would appear as just faces. They are without personalities, without histories. There is nothing to remember them by. They are anonymous strangers. As far as we are concerned, they simply don't matter.

But . . . they did matter to John. They mattered to John because they mattered to God. They all sought the same thing . . . life.

Dissatisfied with their old way of living or simply convinced, for the first time, of their emptiness before God, the people wanted life.

And they felt that John could give it to them. "*What then should we do?*" they asked. And so . . . John instructs the people how they should live.

The rich are to share what they have with those who have nothing, tax collectors are not to collect anymore than what is due, soldiers are to avoid extortion by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with their wages.

Simply put, John offers the people one principle for life: love your neighbor as you love yourself.

And for us, John is sharing how we are to wait for the Messiah. We wait as if his coming was the most important thing in the world.

We sweep the interior of our life and throw out the trash as we would clean our homes for an important guest. Cleaning house doesn't save us, but it does demonstrate our desire for the guest to come.

Anyone who was in the crowd that day and heard John's sermon . . . would probably tell what John did was turn the people around.

That is not a bad definition of repentance: to turn around, to go another way, God's way.

John's preaching was not a lesson in pulling ourselves out of death's grip. John sought to turn people toward a new way of living that would give witness to the coming of God who saves.

As God reached down from the heavens to breath life into the nostrils of Adam, so the Messiah will come to breath new life into those he loves. God would do for the people what they cannot do for themselves.

So . . . what do you think of John's preaching?

According to Luke's Gospel, John's preaching came as "good news." Good news because it announced that salvation does not come by our own effort. Good news . . . because in this season of Advent . . . there is hope that our lives can be changed by the coming one. Good news because repentance and renewal comes as a gracious gift.

The Messiah comes to us . . . and because of this . . . there is cause for rejoicing. Yet, in our rejoicing we are to live in a manner that directs attention to God. John's preaching is a call to a life that *bears witness* to the coming one.

Some years ago, author, Bernie Glassman wrote of the death of his wife.

*"People ask me how I'm doing. It takes a while for me to reply, for it's hard to answer them in words. Finally I tell them I'm bearing witness.*

*I live in a house chosen by my wife, reflecting her tastes and wishes, My own choice would have been a studio in New York City's Bowery, not a house in a canyon overlooking a river.*

*Those were the things Jishu wanted, and Jishu is gone. So I live in her house ~ I call it Casa Jishu ~ and do the things she would have loved.*

*I greet the dawn coming over the mountains, watch the hummingbirds, prune the lilac bushes.*

*Each time I think of the smile on her face had she been here to do these things. Instead I do them, bearing witness to her presence and her absence.*

*How am I doing? I'm bearing witness. And the state of bearing witness is the state of love."*

As we wait for God's son . . . born of Mary.

As we wait. . . may we do those things that God would have us do.

May we bear witness to this God of love. Amen