

Readings & Sermon December 15, 2024

Third Sunday of Advent

Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“Bear fruit wherever you are planted.”



In his book titled “Enough: Discovering Joy through Simplicity and Generosity,” Pastor Adam Hamilton tells a story about a young man named Johnny. Johnny worked at a grocery store, and one day, the chain brought in a motivational speaker who talked to employees about their life’s purpose. Their purpose wasn’t just to stock the shelves, manage the inventory, or scan boxes, bags, and cans. Each encounter with a customer was an opportunity to bless someone, to fulfill a greater purpose, the speaker told them. Those words changed Johnny’s heart and his life. Might they change yours?*

Gospel: Luke 3:7-18

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? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Second Reading: Philippians 4:4-7

Despite being in prison, Paul is remarkably upbeat as he writes this letter. Here, he urges his friends in Philippi to trust God with all their worries and concerns with the hope that they will experience God’s joy and peace.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry 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.

First Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-20

The prophet Zephaniah’s message is mostly one of judgment for sin. This reading, however, which comes from the conclusion of the book, prophesies joy for Judah and Jerusalem. Judgment has led to repentance, and God’s salvation is at hand.

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will

change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.

Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“Bear fruit wherever you are planted.”

Jesus is coming. What should we do? Well, I bought a few Christmas cards, though I haven't written any yet. Last Sunday, I helped my husband put up a few Christmas lights. On Friday, I wrapped gifts and baked cookies. Does it count if they were oatmeal-chocolate chip? Maybe this week I'll make some more Christmasy cookies.

Most if not all of us have some Christmas preparation traditions. We decorate. We carol. We bake. We shop. We write letters about all the great things that happened this year, and we leave out all the mess. And there's nothing wrong with those preparations - as long as they increase your joy rather than increasing your stress.

But John the Baptist is talking about a different kind of preparedness. Last week we heard that John's voice is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.

Today we hear him speak to the crowds that came to be baptized: “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” “Worthy” can be a kind of sticky word. So to put it a little differently, bear fruits that correspond with the practice of repentance. To repent means to turn around. To think and act differently. To change our hearts and lives. Or my favorite translation: To rethink everything.

Bear fruits worthy of repentance. That's a tall order - and not a lot of specifics. So members of the crowd ask John: Tell us, what exactly are we supposed to do? And John doesn't give them a laundry list of burdens to add to their already busy, already stressful lives. They don't have to memorize anything. They don't have to read the latest bestseller about living their best lives. They don't have to police their neighbors' thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors - or even make sure their neighbors show up for John's baptism. John

doesn't even tell those with unseemly jobs like tax collector and Roman soldier to quit those jobs.

It turns out, you can bear fruit worthy of repentance right where you're planted. And those fruits will differ, depending on who you are and WHERE you are planted. If you're a person who has two coats, John says, share with somebody who has none. If you're a person with extra food, share with someone who's hungry. If you're a tax collector, stop collecting more taxes than you're supposed to in order to fatten up your own wallet. If you're a soldier, be satisfied with your wages, and cut out the selfish extortion.

In short, live generously, don't exploit other people, stop pursuing more and more wealth or status or stuff. If even despised Roman collaborators like tax collectors and soldiers can repent and bear fruit right where they are at, then so can we.

So what then should we do? What should you do? Well, it depends who you are and where you are planted. In his book titled "Enough: Discovering Joy through Simplicity and Generosity," Pastor Adam Hamilton tells a story about a young man named Johnny.* Johnny worked at a grocery store, and one day, the chain brought in a motivational speaker who talked to employees about their life's purpose. Their purpose wasn't just to stock the shelves, manage the inventory, or scan boxes, bags, and cans.

Each encounter with a customer was an opportunity to bless someone, to fulfill a greater purpose, the speaker told them. Those words changed Johnny's heart and his life. His purpose wasn't just to bag up grocery orders. He could bless his neighbors, right where he was planted. So here's what he did: Every night he'd scour the internet for an encouraging quote, copy and paste it 300 times, print out his work, and cut it into little strips to place in customers' grocery bags.

Then he'd tell each customer this: "I put a saying in your bag. I hope it helps you have a good day. Thanks for coming here." Within a month, people were waiting in long lines to be blessed by Johnny. Even when the call went out over the intercom that there was no waiting on aisle two, people stayed put in Johnny's lane.

Johnny didn't have to get a new job or earn a special degree. He didn't even have to pack groceries more efficiently. But he did have to rethink everything about his current

position and his true purpose. He had to figure out: How can I bless people, right where I'm planted.

That is the call: To bless people. That is how we prepare for Jesus: We bless people.

John reminds the crowds about that when he brings up the name Abraham. Don't confuse your identity with your purpose, with Abraham's purpose, John warns them. Way back in the book of Genesis, God blessed Abraham, so that through Abraham and his descendants, the whole world would be blessed. God still blesses us, so that through us the whole world might be blessed. That is how we can know joy, and share joy, this season, wherever we are planted.

The apostle Paul knew it, and he was planted in a prison cell. Still, he wrote words of joyful encouragement to the Christians in Philippi. He blessed them, and he encouraged them to bless others. How did they respond? We don't get that part of the story. But the fruit they produced, with Paul's encouragement, probably had something to do with where THEY were planted.

The question for us today is: What should we do? How do we prepare not just for Christmas, but for the return of our Savior, who has come and is coming to set our broken world right: To remove disaster and shame, to lift burdens of oppression, to heal the wounded, welcome the outcasts, and restore joy.

Jesus is coming. What then should WE do? Answering that question will lead us to repent, to change our hearts and lives, to rethink everything. And our answers will be different, depending on who we are and where we're planted. But through the fruits we bear, in all their varieties, God will continue to bless the world.

Pastor Jaime

*"Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity," by Adam Hamilton, 2009 edition, Page 49.

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