

WHAT THEN SHOULD WE DO?

Luke 3:7-18

Sunday, December 13, 2009

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Sermon delivered at Advent Lutheran Church

(as part of an annual pulpit exchange)

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" 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." 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." Oh, and by the way, Happy Holidays!

What are we going to do with this John character two weeks in a row? He puts a real crimp in the holiday spirit! We know that repentance is an integral part of the Advent season, but someone should tell this guy to lighten up. Blogger Kate Huey has rightly noted that a preacher like John the Baptist wouldn't last 10 minutes in most of our pulpits, and yet for two weeks in a row the editors of the lectionary have us reading John's hell fire and brimstone. The only good thing about this lesson is that I don't have to preach it to my own congregation! I'll let Pastor Brown do that at 5 pm!

When I first read this Gospel lesson early last week, I groaned. I had to slog my way through all of these warnings and anger. It felt rather oppressive. But then, when I got to the end, I actually laughed out loud. St. Luke wraps up John's barn burner of a sermon by saying: "So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people." I sure would like to know where it is!

I don't think John knew a lot about marketing. No one ever told him that the best way to attract people is to tell them exactly what they want to hear; things like: "You can have your best life now!" Instead, John told the people that they had to change their lives or risk being chopped down like a bad tree and thrown in the wood pile. And here is, perhaps, the most disturbing part of all: he preached this message to regular folk like us.

We often take comfort in the notion that the prophets typically railed against the religious authorities and the rich who abused the poor. But not here. The people who went out to see John were regular Joes and Janes. And they went to hear him because they were genuinely interested in his message. You would think that John might be happy to see them. But instead of a nice introduction or a friendly "Good Morning", John called them a bunch of

poisonous snakes. And then to add insult to injury, he said: *“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.”* I suspect that I might have gotten up and walked out, but not these folks. It seems that they were pricked in their hearts and asked in all earnestness: *“What then should we do?”*

It’s a really good question. What then should any of us do to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Messiah into our lives? Is church attendance enough? Is believing the right doctrine enough? If it isn’t, then what should we do? John answers that question by first telling us what we should not do. And what it is that we should not do is awfully hard for good, church-going folk like us.

The crowds who listened to John were good, synagogue going folk. They were the children of Abraham, heirs of God’s eternal promise. They were the chosen people, born in the right time and place. They had it all. But John said it was not enough. In fact, if God wanted, God could make rocks into children

of Abraham. Their religious identity, as sacred and good as it was, did not and could not make them ready for the coming of the Messiah.

It doesn't make us ready either. It's awfully tempting to believe otherwise, though, isn't it? We too are the children of Abraham. In addition, we are the children of Martin Luther and John Calvin. We are the folks who refuse to celebrate Christmas before we have walked through the shadows of Advent.

We come to church and sing the songs and pray the prayers, but it's not enough. And once we realize that, we too ask: "what then should we do?"

And John's answer is so simple that if we're not careful, it can slip right by us and we miss the good news that he promised.

In churches like Advent and Broadway and so many others, we understand, and rightly so, that the gospel has profound political and social ramifications.

We know that the Good News of Jesus is supposed to change the world. And because we know that, we tend to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. Some people call it liberal guilt. We are concerned with famine and war and prejudice and the plight of the poor. Our preachers and teachers and publications remind us on a regular basis that we have a responsibility to this world. And that can be a very heavy burden.

I once asked a Bible study group at Broadway if anyone ever felt overwhelmed by the continuous talk of the needs of the world. One of the participants, an established member of the congregation who has spent her life serving the needs of others, responded immediately: "Yes, sometimes it's just too much." Maybe some of you have felt that tiredness too. Maybe you're a little afraid to really ask: "What then shall I do?" for fear that the answer will be too heavy.

When the people asked the Baptist what they should do, he simply said: "If you have two coats, give one of them away. And do the same with your food." Some of the people in his congregation were the hated tax collectors, who made their money by over-charging people and pocketing what was left over. They too asked: "Well, what should we do?" And John replied: "Don't collect any more from the people than what is required." Apparently there were even some despised Roman soldiers who had come to be baptized and they too asked: "John, what should we do?" And he replied: "Don't extort money from anyone by threats or accusations. Instead, be satisfied with your wages."

Now what is really striking about John's answer to the questions was that even though he was preaching an apocalyptic message, proclaiming that the

whole world was about to change, his call to participate in that change was not apocalyptic. According to John, all any of us have to do is be generous and responsible with what we have been given. To the crowds he said "Share." To the tax collectors, he preached "Be fair." And to the soldiers John instructed, "Don't bully." Share. Be fair. Don't bully. Can you imagine a world in which everyone who claimed the name of Christ lived by those simple rules?

Fidelity to the Gospel does not have to be heroic. The Good News of John's message is that in all our lives, every moment of every day, there are lots and lots of opportunities to do God's will and be God's people. Preparing a way for the Lord is as simple as living a simply good life.

And the road to that kind of life begins with the first step. Every year Americans spend 450 billion dollars to celebrate the birth of the One who had no where to lay his head. It's obscene, really. This year, our congregations will not buy poinsettias to decorate the altar. Instead, we'll be asked to make a donation in honor or memory of someone we love to the West Side Campaign Against Hunger. Flowers on the altar are beautiful. But food for the hungry is more beautiful still. The gift of food gives far more glory to the One who broke bread and fed the hungry.

The fruit of our repentance, that way of living that clears a path for Jesus, is remarkably simple. It's something all of us can actually do. And we can start today: share, be fair, don't bully – and thus prepare the Way of the Lord.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.