

The Crowds Respond to John the Baptist
Luke 3:7-18
Third Sunday of Advent, Year C December 15, 2024
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Good morning, friends, and welcome to worship on this Third Sunday of Advent. The weeks are speeding by. I hope that you've been able to take some time to tend to your own spirit in this season of mystery and surprises. If not, I would urge you to do that.

Recall that last week we met John the Baptizer (also called John the Baptist) who came out of the wilderness to call people to repent and be baptized. Today, we will again encounter John, this time preaching news that may be good or bad, depending on how each listener responds to it. If we think of Luke 3:7-18 as a drama, it can be divided into three acts:

Act 1: John's warning about the end of time (3:7-9)

Act 2: Q and A between John and his audience concerning ethical behavior (3:10-14)

Act 3: John's claims about the Messiah who is to come (3:15-18)

As the curtain comes up on Act 1, we find John preaching a "fire and brimstone" message to a ragtag crowd who has come to hear him and be baptized. His "welcoming remarks" are very off-putting: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Luke 3:7). Wow! So his audience is like a bunch of snakes slithering away from a fire? And not just any snakes. "Vipers were thought to eat their way out of their mother's body and so kill her" (*The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, page 116. note 3:7). Now that's a serious insult if we ever heard one! Someone should have handed John a copy of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Dale Carnegie offers helpful guidance on how to influence people: be interested in them; smile; keep in mind that a person's name is important to them; listen carefully; make the other person feel important. As we delve further into today's Scripture passage, we'll note that John fails on all counts, per Carnegie, to find positive ways to influence people. And yet, he manages to win them over. Let's see how he does that. But, fair warning, I'm not suggesting that you try his methods at home!

Although we find John's words exceedingly harsh, we need to remember that he stands in a long line of Old Testament prophets who were tasked with calling people back to God. We may do that in a different, more subtle way, but the message to return to God is the same now as it was then. He tells us that we need to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (3:8). We looked last week at Paul's list of the fruit of the spirit from Galatians 5:22-23: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." We considered how each one might be made manifest in our lives. This week, we want to emphasize the point that repentance has consequences. If we say that we are ready to repent—to reorient our lives *away from* whatever has enthralled us and *toward* God—then our behavior needs to change as well. Our words, actions, and thoughts are to reflect our orientation toward God and our desire to live as a faithful disciple. It's important to note that we don't bring about these changes on our own. They grow out of the Holy Spirit's shaping and renewing of our hearts and minds. And we also want to be clear that our actions, no matter how faithful they seem, are not able to bring us into a right relationship with God. In other words, our actions are a *result* of our salvation, not the *cause* of it. That is a gracious gift of God, not anything we have earned or done on our own.

Act 1 wraps up as John tells his listeners that they cannot rely on their ancestor Abraham to keep them in God's good graces. Similarly, we cannot rely on our church membership, or a long line of family members, perhaps even those who helped to found and move forward the church where we worship today. We ourselves need to live as God's people. If we don't bear good fruit, John has a strong word of warning for us: We'll be chopped down and "thrown into the fire" (3:9). And lest we think that John is being too callous here, recall that Jesus tells a parable in which he speaks of a man who has a barren fig tree that he is ready to cut down. The gardener urges the man to give the tree another chance next year, but if there is no fruit, the tree will be destroyed (Luke 13:6-9).

So, Act 1 seems to close on a terrifying note, with all this talk about being cut off and burned. And yet, John is actually preaching good news. This obliteration will not occur right now. People have a chance to repent, to turn their lives Godward, and begin to bear fruit.

Certainly, John's audience understands that they can and must make changes in their lives. Here in Act 2, the key question is, "What then should we do?" And notice that the crowd in general asks it (3:10), tax collectors also ask (3:12), and soldiers ask (3:14). And John answers by calling each group to ethical reforms in keeping with their station and role. Note that, in all cases, he is not calling for a withdrawal from the larger society. Nor is he calling for a revolt. Rather, his reforms will lead to people loving their neighbor as themselves, as Jesus taught. Let's look at John's responses to each of these three groups.

First, he tells the crowd-at-large that they must share what they have with those in need. He's not saying that we have to give away everything we own. But rather, if you have two garments, you need to give one of them to someone who has none.

Next, John addresses the tax collectors. These are not IRS agents as we know them, but rather people who collect tolls. That might sound like a job where a standard amount of money was collected by someone stationed at a booth, like the old days at the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. But that's not how toll collectors worked in first century Israel. Instead, each toll-taker had to pay in advance for the right to collect tolls. It's not hard to imagine that this system is open to misuse! Toll collectors routinely took what the Roman government charged them, plus whatever they could get away with as a handling charge. And the chief toll collector, the one at the top of the pyramid, could rake in money, as we know from the story of Zacchaeus. John's answer to their question as to what they should do put a real damper on the toll collecting economy. He insisted that they were to take no more than what was due.

The final group included soldiers. We might wonder what Roman soldiers were doing listening to John. These militiamen weren't Romans, but rather local folks we'd call mercenaries who were paid by the Herod family, possibly to protect the toll collectors! John's ethical counsel to them was "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations, and be satisfied with your wages" (3:14). Writing in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Volume IX, page 85), R. Alan Culpepper explains:

The practice of extorting payments by threats was apparently common...Since a soldier's allowance was minimal, there may even have been the expectation that he would supplement it by extortion.

As I read that, what these soldiers are really doing is running a side hustle where they shakedown the people for money by threatening to snitch on them. I'm going to guess that the "report" would not have to be accurate, but the payment would have to be made in full and on

time. Is it any wonder the populace hated these guys?

To sum up Act 2, John is telling those who want to be baptized, whatever their profession, that they must stop greedily exploiting people for their own gain. They are to be satisfied with what they have and help those whose basic needs to live are unmet. John's words apply to our own society, as much as they did to his own.

The discussion now shifts as we move to Luke 3:15, where we read that the crowd is "filled with expectation." During this period there were certainly those who were looking for a savior, perhaps a warrior king like David, as we have noted before. But there was a wide variety of ideas as to who this savior would be and what he would do. Now, along comes John, whose words pierce their hearts. Could he be the one that they and their ancestors have been waiting for? "Christ," "Messiah," and "Anointed One" are three different ways of referring to this same person.

John quickly disabuses his listeners of the idea that he is the one. No, he comes offering a water baptism for the repentance of sins. But he is not in the same league, not even in the same ballpark, as the Messiah who is to come. John claims that he is not worthy to perform the act of untying the Messiah's sandal, a job normally reserved for a slave. No, this Coming One will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (3:16). John concludes with an agricultural image. As grain was gathered into the barn at the harvest, the farmer would use a winnowing fork to pitch it into the air, thus allowing the wind to blow away the useless chaff while the grain would fall to the floor. Notice in verse 17 that, according to John, the One who is coming is already holding the winnowing fork, thus signifying the imminence and urgency of the situation. And to allow Jesus to take center stage, we read in verses 19-20 that John is now off the stage, having been imprisoned by Herod Antipas. The Messiah will soon be here!

Let's think for a few minutes about time. Jesus and John are both about 30 years old at this point. He is just about to start his ministry when John proclaims words of preparation, calling the crowds to repentance. They are living in the time between Jesus' coming and his coming again. Their job is to be alert and get ready to meet him by repenting of sin.

Actually, the same task is at hand for us. Although 2000 years separates from the time of John's preaching, we too are living in the time between Jesus' coming in the flesh and his Second Coming, at which time he will arrive in a cloud, just as the disciples saw him ascend 40 days after his resurrection (Acts 1:3, 9). Just to be clear, Jesus is still very much with us in the person of the Holy Spirit, who was poured out on Pentecost. But there will come a time, unknown to us now, when he will suddenly reappear. So, although we are separated by two millennia, we find ourselves in the same place as John's listeners: We're living in the time between the "now" and the "not yet." Therefore, we need to ask ourselves the same question that they asked: "What then should we do?" (3:10). How do we live in this in-between time?

Before we can answer that question we need to ask: "How do I envision my life as a faithful disciple of Jesus?" Once we can define who we are and how we are to live, then we can think more about what we need to do to get to that place. We've talked a lot about Jesus' expectations of his disciples. At the top of the list is the command to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. What does fulfilling Jesus' commandment look like?

As we think about loving God, we can do a lot during this in-between time. God wants to be in a close relationship with us. That can only happen when we faithfully engage in worship, prayer, meditation, Holy Communion, and Bible study. We may need to reorder our priorities

and adjust our schedules so as to be able to participate regularly in these important activities. Without them, our spiritual lives are the equivalent of thin gruel. We aren't being well nourished in the will and ways of God. So, we need to put God first to be faithful disciples.

As to loving our neighbors, we need to recognize that anyone can be a neighbor. These aren't just the folks next door, or even in our own community or country. Despite our American emphasis on the individual, humans were not created to exist as solitary beings. We live in families. Even if we live alone as adults, we still need human companionship. And that's a two-way street. We need to help, support, and love others, even as they do the same for us. That help and support may require our physical presence, or a listening ear, or a ride to a medical appointment, or a check to help pay the electric bill. I'm not suggesting that we can be all things to all people. Even John didn't require that. But he did preach that people had to be fair and honest in their dealings and willing to share whatever they had.

Perhaps the most difficult part of Jesus' commandment is to love others as we love ourselves. It seems in our society that many people don't love themselves. Some just don't feel "worthy" of love. Some situations are more serious: About 23% of the US population, which translates to nearly 60 million people, or about 1 in 5 adults, suffer from some form of mental illness. And that number surely includes Christians! We have to be willing to share not only our joys but also our concerns with at least one person we trust, whether friend, family member, or professional counselor. We also need to stop comparing ourselves to other people to see how we measure up in terms of wealth, beauty, education, home, car, achievements, and all of the other yardsticks against which many people judge themselves. God loves us—all of us—no matter who we are. When we keep that in mind, we are more able to love ourselves...and more able to be loving, faithful disciples of Jesus. Love, Nan