**Preaching Notes for the Third Sunday of Advent, Year C (December 13, 2015)**

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[**Luke 3:7-18**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=97#gospel_reading)

Things weren’t so different back in the time when the world was preparing the way for Jesus to be born. Back then, just like today, it seemed to people that if things kept going like they’d been going, the whole country was headed for destruction. And just like today, people kept hoping that some great leader would come along and rescue them. But the people back then were hoping for more than just your average great leader. They wanted more than the current line up of presidential hopefuls. They were hoping for someone so inspiring and dynamic, so forceful and wise, so practical and yet holy, that everyone would be able to immediately see that this person was not just another flawed human leader, but someone sent from God. They were waiting and looking for a messiah.

When John the Baptist started preaching in the wilderness, he was not tenuous or shy or unconvincing. In fact, he was quite the opposite. People experienced him as so powerful and honest that they flocked to him in droves. But if they came to hear him expecting a message of encouragement and hope, a voice of holiday cheer announcing the birth of Jesus, they must have been disappointed. He was not really a crowd pleaser.

“You brood of vipers!” John the Baptist screamed at the gathered crowds. “What made you think you could get out of the punishment that God is about to rain down? You better change your ways! You better stop thinking you can get by on your family name! I tell you, God can put your family’s name on the rocks out here! God is ready to cut down the family tree at its roots. Every tree that doesn’t bear good fruit is going to be chopped down and thrown into the fire!” (*my interpretation*.)

So how did the people respond? Did they run in the other direction saying, “Stay away from that guy. He’s bad news. He’s crazy! Run away as fast as you can”?

No, they didn’t run from his message. In fact, they did the opposite. Most people felt themselves drawn into the challenge and wanting to respond. “What should we do?” they asked. “What does God consider to be good fruit?”

John the Baptist said, “Whoever has two shirts should give one of them to somebody who doesn’t have one. Whoever has food should share it.”

Then the tax collectors asked, “What about us? What should we do?” And John said, “Collect only what is required and don’t rip anyone off.”

The soldiers followed on the heels of the tax collectors. “And us? What are we to do?” John said, “Don’t take advantage of your position to extort money from people. Don’t make false accusations. Be happy with what you are paid.”

John sounded like he knew exactly what he was talking about. He spoke with confidence and authority. In spite of the harshness of his message, the people’s hopes were raised. They said to him, “You are the One, aren’t you? You’re the one that God has sent to save us! You are the messiah!”

And John said (*again, my own interpretation of John’s intent*), “No, I’m not the One. All I can do is try to put a little fear in you and baptize you with some water. The One who will really save you will move through your souls like the wind moves though a pile of grain tossed into the air. The messiah will decide which of you is like grain, worth keeping, and which of you is like chaff, fit only to be burned.”

What is most surprising about this exchange is that the people of John’s day understood his words as good news! I’m not at all certain that people today would have the same reaction. I think that most folks today, if they were to hear something like what John said, would be alarmed. I mean, are your people really ready to have the Son of God move through their souls like the wind moves through a shovelful of wheat tossed up in the air? Are they ready to have themselves judged as to whether they are worth keeping, or should be tossed into the incinerator? Does any of this sound like good news to you?

Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe you should ask them yourself.

*Interactive preaching possibility:*

*Ask for a show of hands and say, “If you think you are ready, right this very minute, to be decided upon whether you are wheat or chaff, please raise your hand.”*

*And then follow up with, “All of you who’d rather put off that moment of decision for a little while longer, please raise your hand.”*

When it comes to being saved, I think most of us would rather not have to stand or fall on our own righteousness. I know that I don’t want God to decide on whether I am worth keeping based on how good I’ve been, how much I’ve contributed to the welfare of humanity, or how well I have followed the path set forth by Jesus. Certainly, I can say that I believe the words of John the Baptist when he tells me I’d better shape up and change my ways and be a better person. But if the truth be told, when it comes down to the final judgment, I’d rather not have that conversation. I’d rather put my stake in God’s grace than have a ruling based on my record of righteousness. Because I just can’t be sure how much good fruit my life has really produced. Were God to look at me now and make a judgment today based on what I’ve done so far, I’d be very worried.

John the Baptist, of course, knew that the people to whom he was preaching felt the same way I do. He counted on their sense of their own failure when people came running to him to be saved, and he called them a brood of vipers and told them to turn their lives around and start bearing better fruit. That’s why so many of them repented and got baptized. It was a sign before John, God, and everybody else, that they were intent upon changing their ways.

But of course John the Baptist ended up being wrong about how the Messiah would come with an ax in his hand and judge people by their fruits, and if they did not produce, lay into them with the ax and cut them off at the roots. The thing about the Messiah that is so amazing is his unending love, his mercy, his gentle spirit, and his healing touch. It’s all about that grace (no judgment!), to borrow a line from the popular song.

Jesus didn’t lay into people with an ax. He cast out evil spirits and freed people to start over again. He gave them hope and a chance for a new life. Jesus brought heaven down to earth. The good news of Jesus Christ is that God is not just a judgmental God. In Jesus, God is revealed as always loving, kind, patient, and endlessly merciful. God is not willing to cut us off without a court of appeal. God offers us a second chance and opportunities for healing. God came among us to teach us and to walk with us every step of the way, all the way to the point of death on a cross, and to take us beyond death. That was the message of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the one sent from God to save the world.

So let me ask you this: If you had a choice, who would you rather have to save you? John the Baptist, or Jesus?

I don’t know how bad the future looked to people back in the day when John the Baptist came preaching out in the wilderness, but I do know that things look pretty bad in this country and in our world today. If someone powerful and honest like John were to appear on the scene right now as one of the candidates in the presidential election, I would probably try to go and hear him or her speak. I might find myself persuaded to try and change my ways and to do some symbolic act or ritual as a sign of this intent to God and to myself. If there were some holy river to go to, I might wade into the water and be baptized as a sign of my good intentions.

But here is the good news: We don’t have to wait for any John the Baptist to appear.

* We already have someone to save us.
* God has already sent someone better.
* God has already shown us that the judgment is tempered with mercy.
* We don’t have to change out of worry or fear.

We can choose to change our lives, to repent and turn around, out of a sense of gratitude because Christ has come and Christ is coming again. Christ is here and very near. Christ has brought love and mercy and wisdom of God to bear, even in a world where things seem to completely falling apart.

So if your folks have an extra shirt, tell them to give it to someone who doesn’t have one. If they collect taxes, tell them to take only what is required and refuse to skim or cheat. If they are enforcers of rules, call upon them not to abuse their authority. And most of all, remind them that they don’t have to follow this advice in order to be saved. They have already been saved. They do these things because they are people with grateful hearts who, though they might have been tossed like chaff into the burning fires, have instead found themselves declared as good and righteous people by the grace of God. God has done this through the mercy shown in Jesus Christ. Because as John Wesley said before he died, “Best of all, God is with us.”

[**Zephaniah 3:14-20**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=97#hebrew_reading)

In the prophet’s words, we hear echoed the promise that held John Wesley to the end: “Best of all, God is with us.” God is with us, and so we rejoice. We have nothing to fear because the Lord has taken away all judgments and protected us from our enemies. The Lord is in our midst! God with us! Emmanuel!

And so we can respond to John the Baptist’s call to repent not out of fear, but out of gratitude for what God has done in Jesus Christ.

This is no empty promise made to a people who have never known suffering. These were words of hope offered to the people of Jerusalem, even as they knew that they had been corrupt and unfaithful. The prophet spoke around the time that Judah was being conquered by Babylon. The threat of imminent destruction was all around when Zephaniah brought his words of warning and promises of restoration.

Maybe we can hear these long-ago spoken words speaking to us today. Are we not also an unfaithful and corrupt generation with much to repent? Do we not also face destruction of our own making if we do not change our ways?

Yet even in the midst of our sinfulness, Zephaniah reminds us that God is faithful --even when we are not. We rejoice in the promise that because of Christ there will be a place reserved for us. Christ died for us, even though we are yet sinners! This proves God’s love for us. In the name of Jesus Christ, all are forgiven. Glory to God. Amen.

[**Philippians 4:4-7**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=97#epistle_reading)

And so we do not despair, but rather we can rejoice continually and rest in the knowledge that the Lord is near. This text would be most appropriate as a direct reading or serve as inspiration for the Sending Forth on this Third Sunday in Advent.