

Advent 3 C Sermon
Luke 3:7-18
December 12, 2021

“Awkward Good News”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

⁷John 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? ⁸Bear 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. ⁹Even 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.” ¹⁰And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” ¹¹In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴Soldiers 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.”

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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.” ¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, this Joy Sunday, I find the juxtaposition of Paul's exhortation to "rejoice in the Lord always" and John's less cheery prediction that one is coming who will baptize with fire to be a bit ironic. Joy and judgement are presented to us side by side.

This sense of irony is not so different than a group of young children awaiting the arrival of St. Nicholas and his pack full of gifts, only to be greeted by a cruel birch rod. Until recently, I was unaware that in the 19th century, old St. Nick was cast not just as the bearer of gifts, but also the purveyor of punishments. A children's book from 1821 concludes with the Saint describing the gifts he'd left for the good little boys and girls and a picture of a stocking containing a bundle of switches. Nicholas' imagined words accompany the picture:

But where I found the children naughty
In manners rude,
In tempers haughty,
Thankless to parents, liars, swearers,
Boxers or base tale-bearers

I left a long, black birchen rod,
Such as the dread command of God
Directs a Parent's hand to use
When virtue's path his sons refuse.¹

There's an undeniable irony in casting the "right jolly old elf" with his "sleigh full of toys" as also the punisher of naughty girls and boys. And there's that same sense of irony present with us today on Joy Sunday as we hear the fiery prophet's portent of judgement.

John doesn't come across as much of a "people person," does he? In fact, he seems a bit gauche, socially inept, and awkward. Not that there's anything wrong with being awkward. In fact, I personally feel that I can

¹ John Grossman. "Christmas Curiosities," New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2008.

be extremely awkward at times, so no judgement from me. Just stating the obvious. And yet, John called the people to the Jordan River with a message of repentance and baptism and they actually came. Then he laid into them: “You brood of vipers...every tree that doesn’t bear good fruit will be cut down and burned with fire...the one who is coming will separate the wheat from the chaff and the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire!” Would that work here at New England?

I don’t know about you, but I’ve always been taught that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. I wonder, how attractive *was* John’s coarse message? Is it any wonder he made enemies? Luke softens John’s tirade by concluding with the words: “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” Good news? Really? It’s entirely possible that my definition of good news and Luke’s are somewhat different! How about you? With all the name calling, tree cutting, and chaff burning, does John capture the good news of *your* faith?

The truth is, though, at its core, John’s message was about more than scaring the hell out of people. The crowds had come. They had reaffirmed their commitment to God’s ways through baptism. Now, they were going home—back to their families, their trades, their communities. Their mettle was about to be tested. Would they live as fruit-bearing trees instead of brambles, as nourishing wheat instead of useless chaff? How would they “prepare the way” for the coming of God’s promised one? That, I think, is what John, awkward as he may have been, was truly getting at.

Though we may not be awaiting the arrival of a fearful saint bearing a birch rod or a fire-wielding judge with a winnowing fork, I honestly think it’s a valid question for each of us, this Advent and year ‘round. How are we preparing the way? We come to church on Sundays, ask our questions, listen for the spirit, and reaffirm our commitment to the Christian family and to heaven’s dream for the world. And then we go out again. But, do we bring all that with us? Does it shape our relationships with others and with the world around us? Does it inform our priorities and decision-

making? Does it guide our preparation for the coming of heaven's dream into our midst? John certainly thought that it should.

As people of Jesus' way, our faith is meant to inform not just our Sunday mornings, but our lives beyond these walls. It's meant to be an integrated part of the organic whole that makes up our very selves—who we are and how we live in the world.

This Advent, maybe John's harsh-sounding words can serve as a soul-searching reminder to each of us, to consider how our faith inspires our lives beyond the walls of New England Congregational Church. May we too prepare the way for the coming of heaven's dream and bear good fruit. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Just when it seems that all is lost, O God,
that our brokenness, our failure, has gone too far,
a new day dawns.

Just when it feels like hope is foolish,
that darkness and despair are the only true realities,
the sun rises.

Just when we think we're alone and abandoned,
that life is nothing but pain and emptiness and meaninglessness,
hope arrives among us again.

We pray that a new day might dawn for all those who are hungry,
homeless, or in need; that love's light might shine on those who find
themselves in the midst of violence or despair; that the sun of hope
might rise for all those who are struggling with illness of mind, body, or
spirit. And we pray that we too might be bearers of that light.

We are grateful for every new day
that absorbs the darkness;
for every rising sun
that calls the night to end;
for every messenger of hope and forgiveness
that baptizes us with your love.²

In joy, we now join our voices in the prayer Jesus taught, saying:

Our Father/Mother/Creator, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

² John van de Laar, adapted. "New Days," Sacredize.org, <https://sacredize.com/new-days/>.