

Advent 3 C
Luke 3:7-18
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What Should We Do?
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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 axe 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.

Does anyone else find these final words even slightly ironic? John calls the crowd vipers, preaches hellfire and brimstone, threatens to chop down the non-fruit bearing like trees, and predicts that the messiah will separate the wheat from the chaff – the useful from the useless and burn the latter with unquenchable fire and yet the author of Luke has the gall to conclude the pericope with these words: “So with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” Good news? Really?!! This is the Third Sunday in Advent – Gaudete Sunday, Pink Candle Sunday, Joy Sunday! But this text doesn’t exactly make me want to dance in the pulpit. With every breath, John’s words seem to carry portents of disaster so what exactly is this *good* news of this text for us, today?

Ultimately, John did not have the final word – perhaps this is the best news. The sole purpose of John’s ministry, according to Luke, was to point beyond himself to Jesus. While John may have had a certain flair for the dramatic, he certainly lived into his purpose. He is, as Luke says, “A prophet of God the Most High,” and he paves the way for Jesus’ ministry by provoking a crisis around the nature of faithfulness to and identity before God and by directing popular hopes to the coming of a Messiah.¹ Preaching like John’s leaves you longing for a savior!

The second bit of good news in our text from Luke is the one I’d like to spend a little time with today. After John spells doom and gloom for his hearers they ask him what they should do. John responds, “*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise. [Tax collectors should] collect no more than the amount prescribed for [them and soldiers should] not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with [their] wages.*” In other words,

¹ *Commentary on Luke* by Joel B. Green from “The New Interpreter’s Study Bible,” 2003.

be honest, be kind, and work hard. One might have expected John to prescribe a treatment for the social ills of his people that included a long communal bath in the Jordan River, moving to the wilderness, camel's hair clothes, and a steady diet of locusts and honey. But he didn't. There is a certain good news in the simplicity of his remedy. Be honest, be kind, and work hard. That's it. That's what it takes to be ready to receive the Messiah.

In the harried days that lead up to all the holiday hubbub of Christmas, a simple remedy like this one is good news indeed! We make long lists of things we need to do to prepare for the coming of Jesus and Santa Clause and all the relatives, siblings, parents, in-laws, nieces, nephews, children, friends, and coworkers we will entertain this season, but John said that all you really need to do is be honest, be kind, and work hard.

The contrast between John's preparations and our own make it seem like we're preparing for the wrong thing entirely! What would it look like, though, if we simply did as John directed? What would it look like if *everybody* did as John directed? If everybody was honest, was kind, was hard-working? It's so simple it sounds inane, but the truth of the matter is that the problems we face as families, communities, and our global community could be eradicated if we followed John's simple instructions for preparing for the Messiah.

I'll be honest with you; I love Christmas preparations. I love greenery on the porch, and the staircase, and the fireplace. I love decorating the Christmas tree with all my favorite vintage ornaments, and setting out the nativity scene, and the cardboard putz village, and my unusual celluloid reindeer collection. I love shopping for gifts, wrapping, sending cards, and entertaining. But, when it comes down to it, none of those things look very much like John's version of preparation. Be honest, be kind, and work hard. That's it. He doesn't even mention tinsel.

It would be more than a little hypocritical for me to stand up here today and tell you that this Christmas you should *just* ring bells, or buy gifts for underprivileged kids, or take olive branches to the neighbors and coworkers you might have offended in the last year, or work nights at the warming center. After all, there's nothing fundamentally wrong with all the trappings associated with our celebration of Christmas. It's just that those things have a tendency to take over – to feel like all we need to do to prepare. But John says, “Uh-huh, not so fast. Be honest, be kind, and work hard.” All the rest is just icing on the cake, or sprinkles on the cookies, or tinsel on the tree. I guess, it's really a matter of perspective.

Today, with 10 days to go, 3-out-of-4 candles lit, and the big day just around the corner, may we remember the good news that the real work of preparation is actually a much shorter checklist. And infinitely more difficult. In fact, there's probably enough there to keep us busy for the rest of the year!

May peace and blessings and perspective be ours as we prepare. Amen.