

“What Should We Do?”
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle
3rd Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2018
Luke 3:7-18

He’s back! Last Sunday he showed up out there in the wilderness, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Luke, the gospel writer, portrays him as the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of Isaiah; John’s is “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord . . .’” Last Sunday we noticed how out of place John is if you consider who were the real movers and shakers of his day and time – Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod and all the rest. He’s a “lone puff of wind” out there in the wilderness. We noted as well how out of place he is with our own holiday preparations. After all, it’s only a few weeks each year when we’re actually encouraged to feel good about things – and this year, God knows, we really need that! But here he comes, as unwelcome as a loud, obnoxious party guest. Who invited him? Well, the church did, among other reasons, for the high esteem in which Jesus held him. About John Jesus said: “There has never been anybody born of woman greater than John the Baptist.”

And so as John’s sermon continues in today’s gospel reading where he fills out what is involved in this “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” It’s not a very inviting message to start with - hardly what we’d consider a wise church-growth strategy. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” We can imagine he didn’t stop with that.

Given the harsh message that John was delivering, we may forget that the people were coming out to the desert to hear him, coming out in droves. Fred Craddock points out that if you take all the gospels together – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – the people came from what today we would call Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Arabia. Amazing! “Standing under the burning sun, sand swirling in your face, people standing together who had sworn on their mother’s grave, ‘I wouldn’t be caught dead with these people!’ Jews and Arabs standing together, because, when the Word of God is preached, you tend to forget why it is you hate this person next to you.”

The crowds came. All the gospels say it. They left what they were doing, like all the important stuff we can’t break away from even for our kids, all the things our jammed calendars say can’t wait – they left behind and went out to hear John preach. It must have been riveting, out there with a rock or a stump as his pulpit, the sun, moon and stars as chandeliers, with the Jordan River as his baptismal font, he preached: “The judge is coming, and I’m here to serve the subpoenas.” And they came in droves. At the end of our passage this morning Luke writes: “So with many other exhortations (John) preached good news to the people.” Good news? Good news.

Listening to his sermons must have been like a simple meal of rice and vegetables after too many days of holiday leftovers – turkey made up every way you can think of, all the cookies and sweets. Finally you give up, and you feel better, the simple thing making the difference. He must have been persuasive – the rough grain of his character, disciplined through living off the scarceness of the desert, what he said and what he was cut from the same cloth. He must have been persuasive because after the sermon they came over and said to him, “What should we do?” And he said to them, “If you have food, share it. If you have any clothes, share them.” The tax collectors came and said, “What are we to do?” He said, “Don’t take any more than is your due.” And the soldiers standing at the rim of the crowd, dispatched to keep an eye on things, when everyone else was gone, shuffled awkwardly up to the pulpit and said, “Any word for us?” And he said, “No violence and don’t intimidate people and don’t forage around here trying to supplement your income. Be content with your wages.”

So far, so good – it helps to know what steps we can take to get on the right road. But that’s not the end of it, not even the beginning. The strong, even frightening images remain part of the message. The axe is at the root of the tree, and every tree that doesn’t bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire! Are you ready for what’s coming? Repent! But that’s not what was frightening about it. What’s frightening about listening to John preach is that he puts you in the presence of God. And that’s what everybody wants, and that’s what everybody doesn’t want.

John was beckoning everyone to the light that was coming into the world. He had some of the light himself, though he wasn’t the light. He had enough of it for folks to see themselves in the light of God, as opposed to the dim lamps of the world. In the world’s light we can compare ourselves to everyone else, and we all come off looking pretty good. We convince ourselves that God grades on the curve, and we’re all OK, compared to others. And then you come into the presence of God, to the altar, and it’s all different. We’ve heard it called “the moment of truth.” Then the whining is over, the excuses and excusings stop. You know, it’s the school, it’s the church, it’s the government, it’s the board, it’s the people over here or over there. No more, no more excuses. It just stops. Like a 1968 VW Beetle or a 2018 Lexus – when either one runs out of gas, it’s just a hunk of metal. That’s just the fact of it.

The truth of it is, like the Apostle Paul wrote – the good that I want to do I don’t do, the evil I deplore is what I do. I’m crucified between the sky of what I intend and the earth of what I perform. That’s the truth of it. We all know what the moment of truth is. We all want it; we all don’t want it. Whether we talk about it or not, it’s still there. It doesn’t matter if it’s buried deep. It doesn’t matter if you’re in the fast lane or the slow lane. It doesn’t matter if you’re well-off or down-and-out. That’s the mistake we tend to make in the church, that you can only minister to folks when they’ve got a crisis or things are falling apart. No, the people up walking around and doing great have the same need. It’s just that there might be a little more of a buffer between them and feeling the hard cold edge of the axe. But it doesn’t matter if you’re on top of the world or feeling trapped inside it, your need is the same.

That's what John meant when said don't count on your pedigree as a child of Abraham. God can make descendants of Abraham out of the rocks along the side of the road if God wants to. Who told you, just because of the way the world's dim light shines on you, that you can escape the wrath of what's to come, the truth that's hurtling toward you?

Fred Craddock tells of when he was pastoring in Tennessee there was a girl about seven years old who came to his church regularly, to Sunday School. Sometimes her parents let her stay for church. They didn't come. They'd let her off at church and drive on. They moved there from New Jersey, from the chemical plant. He was upwardly mobile, both very ambitious. They didn't come to church. But on Saturday nights, everyone knew about their parties. They have parties not so much for entertainment but for reasons of upward mobility. They invited the right people – from the one just above him in the company, on up to the boss. There was lots of drinking and wild things going on, vulgar things, he says. Everyone in town knew about the parties. But there was a beautiful little girl every Sunday at church.

One Sunday morning Fred looked out and saw she was there in worship, along with some other folks, whom he realized after a while were her parents. After the sermon, at the close of the service, as was customary in that church, came an invitation to discipleship. Mr. and Mrs. Mom and Dad came to the front and confessed their faith in Jesus Christ. Afterward he said to them, "What prompted this?" They said, "Well, you know about our parties?" Craddock said, "Yeah, I heard about your parties." They said, "Well, we had one last night again, and it got a little loud and it got a little rough. And there was too much drinking. Our daughter woke up and came downstairs, she was on about the third step. And she saw that we were eating and drinking and she said, 'Oh, can I give the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank him for this food. Goodnight everybody.'

"She went back upstairs. Everyone started excusing themselves from the party. 'Oh my land, it's time to go, we gotta be going. We've stayed too long.' Within two minutes the room was empty." Mr. and Mrs. Mom and Dad were picking up crumpled napkins and spilled peanuts and half-eaten sandwiches, and taking empty glasses to the kitchen when they meet together in front of the sink. They look at each other and he expresses what both of them are thinking: "Where do we think we are going?" The moment of truth.

What John preached in making ready for the coming of the Messiah, the Son of God, is the most refreshing thing in the world. Repent, turn around, look at each other, look at the truth. The kingdom of God is right at the door! Of course all the people jumped at that, like it was going to be the cure for everything, but it wasn't going to fix everything. That's not the point of the kingdom of God. Some things can't be fixed. That's just the way it is.

In the novel Saint Maybe the main character is responsible for the death of his brother – an accident for which he feels responsible. He gives himself to trying to redeem his life through working tirelessly in and for the life of a small, quirky church known as the Church of the Second Chance, as well as raising his brother's son, who is a teenager, not much younger than him. But no matter how much he did, the pain of his brother's death never left him. But through his connection with the Church of the Second Chance he did come to

receive and understand forgiveness. Some things you don't fix. But this is what John said: "The Messiah is coming. Get ready by repenting and confessing your sins." And they confessed their sins and they were baptized in the Jordan, and they were forgiven. And what's that like? The Bible has a lot of images for that. New creation is one of them. "Morning has broken like the first morning, blackbird has spoken like the first bird." New creation, new beginning. Picture a child, third grader, trying to finish a math assignment, in a hurry, at the end of the school day. The teacher is rushing them. She tries to erase a mistake, tears the paper, makes a black smear, and begins to cry. The teacher sees it, comes over and slides a new sheet of paper on the desk and says, "Why don't you just start over?"

The Bible says it's like a snowfall – you get up early and there's about four inches covering everything - not a print on it yet. You look across the alley and what yesterday afternoon was the ugly garbage dumpster is now a mound to the glory of God. That's what the Bible calls it, and that's what John is offering. The people all came out to him because maybe they knew, or if they didn't they found out, that the only way to get to see the Messiah is to come to the desert, to pass through where the truth is.