

Sermon for Advent 3C
Sunday, December 16, 2018
“The way things are isn’t the way things have to be”

Text: Luke 3:7-18

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For the second week in a row, we find ourselves encountering the words of John the Baptist, cousin of Jesus, forerunner of the Messiah. What was his message all about and what can we do with his message? What does it mean “to prepare the way of the Lord?” John’s answer to the crowd are simply, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” In other words, live life in such a way that demonstrates that you’ve really made a change, a *metanoia*, a turning back toward God, focusing on living life according to the ancient law. In this telling of the story by St. Luke, he is talking not just to a specified group of people; he is speaking to a crowd, the community at large. And he is saying to his world, the way things are isn’t the way things have to be.

John called the people in the crowd a “brood of vipers,” because they had problems. The world was full of sin, deceit, inequality, and harm perpetuated by one set of humans against another set of humans. But, they went around making excuses for themselves, excuses of privilege, of being in God’s “in” crowd. The Jews had become complacent and felt secure because they thought that because they said the proper prayers, knew the words of the Torah, they didn’t have anything to worry about. They were of the proper bloodline. They had an in with God, because they were God’s chosen people; they were the elect. They were on God’s A-list. “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.” John was speaking to all of the Jews. In Matthew’s version of this story from Chapter 3 of his gospel, John was speaking to Pharisees and Sadducees, but Luke’s version says it was “a crowd,” because this message was meant not just for religious leaders, but for everyone—for the entire community. There was more to life than just being comfortable with what they had, or where they came from. John’s message to them was that they needed to change and they needed to help the world change. Modern Christians act like that sometimes. We we think we’re best buds with God because we go to church, we read our Bibles, we say our prayers. We’re on God’s A-list simply because we’ve accepted Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior. But John’s message is, “No.” Simply saying

we're Christians isn't enough, because there are things that need to be done differently. There's a world hurting out there, and we've got to do something to change it. If not, "the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit [will be] cut down and thrown into the fire."

The people seemed to be willing to take John seriously. They asked him, "What should we do?" The way things are isn't the way they have to be. It isn't enough just to call yourselves people of the covenant. The covenant means we have to do right by each other and take care of each other, not engage in unfair practices as you're doing. Tax collectors, for their part, were known to "skim off the top," filling their own pockets with other people's hard-earned money. Soldiers coerced, threatened, and falsely accused others to get money from them to line their pockets. Both were working for Imperial Rome. But John was calling them back to the covenant of Abraham that they were supposedly professing. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." In other words, treat everyone fairly and with respect. A very simple message from the man who had just called them a brood of vipers, but a message so powerful that they thought he must be the Messiah. But, John explained in the last part of his message that he was, in fact, *not* the messiah, but simply the one who was born to prepare his way.

This simple message speaks to us as well, because we live in a world that still treats others unfairly, where those who have much try to take more, where people coerce others to get what they want, and where Christians think that the label alone is enough to save our souls. We live in a world of empires, only today the biggest empires don't go conquering territory and peoples, our biggest empires conquer through economics—wielding power through wealth and influence. There are too many complacent Christians. Christians who claim the faith of Jesus and think that it's enough to go through the motions of being a Christian, thinking that because we have accepted Christ we are part of God's A-list. But John the Baptist said, "No. That is not enough." It's not enough for us to claim our place in the Body of Christ and let his children go hungry, or naked. It isn't enough for us to boast membership in the Family of Christ,

the Church, and not treat all of our brothers and sisters with due respect and fairness. It isn't enough for us to lift up the Holy Scriptures as our model for holy living and not see Christ dwelling in all of God's children or see God in all of his creation. All of those things distract us from living Christ-like lives and separates us from God. John's message exhorts us to let go of anything that hinders our relationship with God, let go of our selfish desires and our personal hangups, put aside our gripes and disagreements, and turn back toward God. Simple instructions, yet ones which we still find difficult to live out. It seems too simple for such a complicated world we live in, but that is exactly the point. It may not be much, it may not make the daily news, but even through the simple things we do, we are still making a difference, because we are declaring that the way things are isn't the way they have to be.

The end of John's exhortation gives us hope. When the crowd thought John might be the Messiah, he told them that he was not, for the one who is more powerful is coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." John is not talking about hell. He is using imagery from the harvest, imagery that would have been very familiar to his audience. A winnowing fork separates the wheat from the grass and other weeds that were collected, and then they are thrown into the fire to be burned. Fire purifies. Fire cleanses. Fire renews. Fire destroys the bad stuff and allows fresh new growth. This is an Advent message, because it looks forward to the coming Messiah. If we live in this new way, then we are showing that we really have made a change, we have really made a *metanoia*, we have really turned our selves around to face God. For the crowd listening to John the Baptist, it meant that the great ministry of Jesus was about to begin and, as his forerunner, John was setting the stage. For us, we look forward to Christ's coming again with hope for the peace and joy that is to come. While we are waiting, we can be doing better than what we're already doing. We need to be doing right by each other. The way things are isn't the way they have to be

Listen to the voice crying in the wilderness. Let us prepare the way of the Lord by turning ourselves again toward God and being bearers of good fruit. Let us show the world that the way things are isn't the way they have to be. Amen.

Resources

The Rev. Dr. Hannah Adams Ingram, “Advent 3C: The way things are is not how they have to be,” <https://modernmetanoia.org/2018/12/03/advent-3c-the-way-things-are-is-not-how-they-have-to-be/>

Feasting on the Word for Advent 3 (Year C, Volume 1)

David Lose “Ordinary Saints” from ...*in the Meantime*, <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/advent-3-c-ordinary-saints/>

Judith Jones in *The Working Preacher*, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2711