

Sermon: What Then Should We Do?

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 3:7-18**

John the Baptist plays a particular role in the Gospel story according to Luke. Last week, we found him in the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, fulfilling the words of Isaiah, who said, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

Today, we pick up the story right where we left off only to find John is in a mood.

John’s *‘baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’* seems to be a popular message because Luke tells us that now there are *crowds* – plural – coming out to be baptized. There are no Pharisees or scribes in the crowds following John, just people in need of a baptism of repentance, people seeking forgiveness for what they’ve done. Among them happen to be tax collectors and soldiers.

By now, we should be getting the feeling that John is not a touchy-feely kind of prophet. His first line is a real attention-getter, in the same way that a Marine drill instructor gets your attention by calling you a maggot on the first day of basic training. You might be shocked at first but you’re wide awake after that.

The people might have wondered, ‘we’re here seeking baptism and forgiveness; how are we fleeing from God’s wrath to come? Or are we just hedging our bets?’

Right off the bat, then, John sucked all the air out of the room and put everyone on edge. Yet, no one left to go home; they stayed together in their communal spiritual and physical wilderness. Maybe he does represent the crowd’s last best hope for salvation. Acknowledging John’s authority, they asked, ‘What then should we do?’

After that harsh opening, John’s actual message seems rather tame, even kind.

To the crowds, he said, ‘share – clothe the naked and feed the hungry;’ to the tax collectors, whom nobody liked but seem to have tolerated their presence, he said, ‘be fair & just;’ and to the soldiers, he said, ‘do your job without being bullies.’ This was advice they could follow, and they began to think that maybe *this* guy was the Messiah.

John speaks about a world in which everyone can participate right now. He's not asking anyone to do without or do anything beyond their means. He only requires us to give over our lives to God and to live according to God's ways. That doesn't seem like such a bad or difficult thing to do. In fact, it's what we strive for. John merely says that God's kingdom is within our reach right now, all the time.

The lectionary also gives us a hopeful, positive reading from Isaiah. He says God is our salvation, and with joy, we will draw water from the wells of that salvation. Isaiah speaks in an active voice: trust and be not afraid; give thanks; make known God's deeds; sing praises; shout aloud; for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

John the Baptist is more concerned with today, and maybe tomorrow. But there is that bit about baptism with the Holy Spirit and by fire, and a winnowing of the wheat from the chaff. This is end times stuff, and he's talking about God. How does that work if God's kingdom is within our reach right now?

The crowds asked, 'What then should we do?' Do this, he said. The crowds asked, 'Are you the Messiah?' No, he said, that comes later.

And off he went to proclaim the good news which is all about the right now in God's kingdom here on earth.

John also warned us not to rest on our ancestral laurels. We could all be direct descendants of Abraham, but it doesn't matter; we have to prove ourselves every day on our own merits, regardless of our illustrious pasts.

Imagine living in a world where no one lived in poverty. Or imagine a place and time where everyone lived in a safe and secure home. Or what if it truly was the content of our character rather than the color of our skin that mattered?

These are all analogous to John's answers when the crowds asked, 'What then should we do?' Help those in need; be fair to people, especially if you control the scales; treat everyone with the respect and dignity you would want for yourself. In other words, be a mensch, so to speak.

No one likes to be judged anyway, not by our friends, spouses, co-workers. It makes us uncomfortable at best. We know that justice means getting what we deserve, and that mercy means getting what we don't deserve, but the prospect of receiving God's judgment might make you shy away from God.

To judge something is to see it as it is. Kittens are cute until you catch them hanging from the window screens or working over the couch with their sharp little claws. But that's their nature. For the most part, they are pretty cute.

God sees us as we are too. We're all God's children and God knows and understands our natures. On my worst days, I don't want God to see me, like a kitten caught in the act. And on my best days, I hope God noticed.

But God is always around. Isaiah said that we need not be afraid when God is near. As the LORD said to Jeremiah, 'Am I a God nearby, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord' (Jeremiah 23:23-24).

So, escaping God's judgment is futile; got it. That's not necessarily a bad thing.

According to Elihu in the Book of Job, 'There is no darkness or deep shadow where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves' (Job 34:22). So, it goes both ways: God has an eye on the tax collector too. God cares about everyone, even if we sometimes do not.

But maybe God doesn't see or care what is horrible about us. Last week, Malachi spoke about how God will refine us with fire as silver and gold are refined; that all the impurities will be removed, implying that there is something good and shiny within us.

The same is true with the wheat and the chaff – it's all one thing until it hits the threshing floor for God's winnowing-fork to separate at the end times. We are the wheat, all of us. The chaff is the outer covering that has no value to God and so it gets burned.

It is the Christian hope that we are all seen by God and that none of us are forgotten. It is our hope, too, that by the time we do face God's judgment, the impurities in the silver and gold and the chaff covering the wheat will be gone from our nature, and that what God will see in us will be the best gold, the purest silver, and the finest wheat.

This is sounding more and more like good news now.

Knowing all this, we can indeed sing for joy that God is in our midst. Now we can be filled with expectation and anticipation for the coming of the Messiah.

Amen.

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