

Today's Sermon

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

December 13, 2015

Advent 3C

Luke 3:7-18

Don't Run Away

Preparing for GOD means dealing with problems

—The Rev. Drew Downs

Not Prepared

I think we need a good sense of humor to hear that gospel this morning.

"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.

Wow! Such good news it is!

This is not an easy gospel, to hear, is it? I really appreciate these "meta" moments as a preacher in which the people in the story are feeling a bit like we are. When their hearing of the "good" news is about as shocking and uncomfortable as our own.

They are not prepared to hear these words from John the Baptizer. They've come to the river, to the Jordan to be baptized by the prophet of Yahweh in the wilderness. They have come to hear him preach, that he might show them the living GOD. To help them find GOD revealed.

And what they receive is words of repentance and reconciliation. We heard that last week, too. Repent of your sin and receive mercy. Be reconciled to your community.

And we heard that John the Baptizer had come to prepare the way of the LORD. That his work isn't just preparing for Jesus's arrival, the one we hear more about today, but preparing for what Jesus actually is: the inbreaking of GOD.

So when we heard that quote from Isaiah

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of Yahweh, make his paths straight.'"

We didn't hear only about Jesus, but what GOD is doing; that GOD is coming into the world.

Doing Something

The people are certainly confused by what they hear. They expect to hear how GOD was coming to save them in the way GOD had saved them in the past: through kings and rescuers. Through deliverance from exile in Egypt and Babylon. That GOD was coming to save them from oppression at the hands of Rome.

John doesn't give it to them. His good news has a different tone.

Do something. He seems to say. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." Hearing John here must have driven Martin Luther crazy. Do! Create! Make something! Become worthy of what GOD is offering. Don't rest on your identity. Don't say "But I'm a good Christian" and "I was baptized and confirmed" and "I'm in church every Sunday!" Don't rely on status. Be different. Do something. Act.

How? What should we do? They ask.

Give. And don't steal. Share of what you have and don't extort and take from another.

This seems so simple, doesn't it?

Give. And don't steal. Share. And don't hurt.

This sounds really good to us. We have collected so many toys this year for Toys for Tots and gift cards for the Salvation Army. We collected coats for the homeless and have begun collecting for the point-in-time survey in January. When Deby asks us to give, we give. When David asks us to give, we give. When Sandy asks us to give, we give.

But John is telling us to give differently. If you have two coats, give one to someone who has no coat. If you have more than enough food, give to someone with no food. This isn't "buy extra" or create a simple system to give a little more than you currently give. This is a call to share of what we have from what we already have.

And I wonder how we would hear this call if we invited each other to give, not our extra, but our second. Not our ratty old jeans, but our second nice pair. Not the extra box of spaghetti in our pantry but the food directly from our table. Our seconds: second cars. Our second TVs. Our second suits or dresses. Our second garden shears. Our second computers, tablets, phones. Our second dolls. Our second games. Our second morning off.

What if we asked each other to give away all of our seconds? Would we feel free? Or would we run away like the pious young man because we have a lot of stuff? Maybe post on Facebook *You're not going to believe what the preacher just said. We like to explain this stuff away - to read these calls to live differently as metaphors. Easier to pretend that we aren't **really** being called to live differently.*

What if we actually did what John asks us to do?

Don't Run Away

I love how the writer of Luke describes this moment, this sense of confusion. These people who have flocked to John the Baptizer, they don't know how to take this guy, what to do with what he's said, or if this really is prophecy: is GOD really speaking to them? Because I know we would wonder that. We do! *This isn't Jesus, after all. It's just John, we think to ourselves.*

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;

John is preparing the way for Yahweh, remember? How GOD is coming to be in the midst of humanity. And that way is in the one "more powerful than [he]": Jesus, son of the Living GOD.

John is not the way. It is not through a prophet that they will find the inbreaking GOD. It will be a more powerful, a more worthy one. A savior and a redeemer of the world.

This is how John proclaims "good" news. It is not the fires of judgment or the purification through death that is good. That stuff sounds scary. It is the coming of GOD, of GOD's chosen.

This is why he calls them a brood of vipers.

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.

he says to them. *Don't run away from this. Let your work create your worth. Not because we will earn our redemption, but that we make redemption our work. That we live as the people worthy of GOD's redemption. That we begin setting things right so that GOD will come and set everything right.*

Peace From Within

GOD isn't the Big Other, coming to fix our world from without, but the foundation and the essence of our world now. And if we want things to be different: if we want an end to violence and poverty and systemic oppression, we've got to make that happen for our work is to pattern ourselves after GOD, that we live in the Kingdom Come before the Kingdom can come.

We cannot run from this responsibility to fix the brokenness and bring Shalom (peace) to our community. *Bear fruits worthy of repentance! Because if we can't do it, GOD will find someone else to do it! GOD can make the children of Abraham from these stones!*

This is the good news this Advent, this Gaudete Sunday in which we rejoice in GOD, rejoice in what GOD is doing! Even from stones can GOD create children to bear fruits worthy of repentance. GOD is **doing** in our midst, acting, being, sharing, giving in our midst. GOD is raising up children all around us! Praise GOD! Rejoice!

The bad news is that institutional Christianity isn't really getting the job done. We're resting on our status as children of Abraham. But our GOD isn't so confined. Our GOD isn't so constrained. GOD doesn't need to comport to our rules for GOD. GOD isn't only about the kids in the official line. Just read your Bible. One consistent theme is GOD goes where the fruits are born. GOD raises them up: those who are tending to the fruit trees. Those looking to the harvest.

This is what we are preparing for. This new creation, these fruits each of us, all of us, are called to tend to. The fruits we are to bear, that spring from us. Not in how "good" we think we are, but in who we become, in the work that we do, planting and tending to this grove of trees that is our church, our patch of dirt here on 7th Street. How we, all together,

bear the fruit worthy of repentance.

These preparations, this waiting we all do, is the work of GOD. Preparing for the coming of Jesus, preparing for GOD among us. Preparing with hope and anticipation. Rejoice! For this is good news. Amen.