

A Home for All
Luke 3: 7-18
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As we meet John the Baptist in Luke chapter 3, he is preaching in the region around the Jordan River and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. All of this, Luke tells us, is in the context of a vision of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah:

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

So, do you remember that sweet image of Zechariah holding and blessing John, and the soothing sounds of Dvorak’s New World Symphony from last week? Brace yourself for a somewhat different tone as we continue in verses 7-18.

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 ax 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.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Well, that was kind of a shock to the system wasn’t it! I bet you don’t see the brood of vipers passage in too many Advent calendars, where each day you open up a tiny window

and there's a verse and a picture. Though, that would be kind of exciting if somewhere, along the way to Christmas John was lurking in one of those windows, like a Jack-in-the-box waiting to pop out and scare expectant window openers.

John seems so out of place. But if we take an honest look at the lectionary texts throughout Advent, we see so many passages like this filled with a prophetic sense of urgency and words of judgment. John is calling the people, like Advent calls us, to wake up. And it grabs our attention.

These texts remind us that Advent isn't just about preparing for Christmas. We are waiting and preparing for Christ's return. This wake up call to repentance so often goes hand in hand with warnings of judgment because the brokenness of the world in all its complexity must be dealt with as all things are made new in the kingdom of God. Only God can do that.

Still, we may bristle at John's message. It is striking to me, therefore, to notice who it was that heard John's message. "The crowds" is not all that descriptive but it's your everyday people. Luke also tells us even tax collectors and soldiers were there. And they were all receptive to his message! "What should we do?" they ask.

You have this diverse group of people within first century Judaism, politically divided, who would probably not ever associate with one another or at least would probably look with derision or suspicion at one another. The crowds, tax collectors, soldiers.

Also striking is in the final verse John's message is summed up as good news. Really? Is that what that was? Ax, winnowing fork, unquenchable fire...How? It's because this vision of Isaiah that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" is about to come into focus as Jesus arrives on the scene. John stands at the juncture of the ages. He is last in the line of prophets carrying forward the promise made to Abraham that all nations of the earth would be blessed through his descendants. He has one foot in that age and the other in the messianic age with the arrival of Jesus.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the doors of God's kingdom are flung wide open as Jesus sends his disciples unto the ends of the earth. The mission of the Church continues throughout the New Testament, expanding to include Gentiles and this thread of all flesh seeing the salvation of God reaches its goal in the vision of Revelation 21:3 in which the home of God is among us. God will dwell with us and we will be God's people. God's home is a home for all. That is the trajectory.

As Jesus draws near, salvation draws near and that is why what John announces is good news. Now is the time to get things in order. What John tells to each group asking "what should we do" isn't unrelated to the work of salvation. It has everything to do with God's work of salvation. We have a tendency to think of salvation only in spiritual terms. God is in the business of saving souls. True, but there's more.

What I hear John doing, and what Jesus will expand on in his ministry and teaching, is inviting his hearers into an understanding of salvation that is wrapped up in concern and love for their neighbor. It isn't enough that you are children of Abraham he says. Your status won't save you. But participation in the transformed community of God's people in Christ will.

If you can help it, you won't let a neighbor go without a coat or food. You won't participate in a corrupt system by collecting more than the prescribed taxes. You won't use your position as a soldier to extort and intimidate to get ahead. God doesn't just want to save souls. God wants to save bodies, social systems and economic structures. And how we love and free our neighbor from whatever binds them is as much a part of this comprehensive saving work of God as the spiritual realities we tend to emphasize. I love the way Father Greg Boyle, who has worked with gang members in Los Angeles for over 30 years puts it. He says, *"I discovered that you do not go to the margins to rescue anyone. But if we go there, everyone finds rescue."* That's salvation language.

All flesh will see the salvation of God. God's home among us is a home for all. That is where our story is headed and we've got work to do. I want to share with you part of that work that has taken place in recent weeks. Months ago, a task force on inclusivity made up of youth and adults put together the following statement, which was approved by session and is now on our website.

In response to God's unconditional love for all people, made known to us in Jesus Christ, Westminster Presbyterian Church is called to embody that same love in our life and ministry.

As a community of faith, we affirm the image of God in people of every racial identity, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, gender, relationship status, physical or mental ability, sexual orientation, and gender identity or expression. We welcome all who desire to participate in our congregation, for everyone brings gifts and experiences that strengthen and enrich the life of the church. We commit ourselves to making inclusivity a reality for this congregation and our local community, by continuing to learn and grow in friendship with one another.

We especially proclaim this statement of welcome to those who have been excluded and/or told that they do not fully reflect the image of God. If you are looking for a place to share in God's great love and affirm that all people are God's children, we invite you to join us in our faith journey toward greater love, respect and understanding of one another.

This statement beautifully challenges us to cultivate a community of welcome, mutual love and respect, as we all seek to follow Jesus in the world and make this place a home for all.

Chris Clark along with several youth have added so much to worship this Advent in presenting these poems each week. This one was written with love for all who identify as transgender and/or non-binary. I'm grateful for the work of the inclusivity task force to stretch us into a more intentional posture of welcome. Most of us have likely never read

the fine print on a community's website to find out if we'd be welcome there or not. But for those who have, to find words of welcome loud and clear could mean the world.

Friends, like John we stand at the juncture of the ages between the resurrection and 2nd coming of Christ. In a time when it is so easy to walk away from one another, to separate into us and them, may the salvation of God at work in our life lead us into ever deepening fellowship and unity with one another and to a greater welcome to all as we prepare the way for the coming Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Resources

Greg Boyle quote

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/03/28/father-greg-boyle-i-thought-i-could-save-gang-members-i-was-wrong>