

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Canticle 9

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

“You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come?”

No aspiring seminarian or itinerant preacher is ever going to get a good reaction to a sermon with an opening like that! It's enough to get a person thrown out of homiletics class or discreetly asked to leave a preaching seminar. You can't talk to people like that and expect to get good results.

John the Baptist appears to be having a very bad day. He's grumpy and he's frustrated and he's angry with the folks standing right in front of him. Surely, no one is ever going to accuse John the Baptist of being politically correct. He doesn't seem to be the least bit interested in wooing them and winning them over. He just threw a bucket of cold water all over them! But he got their attention.

So who is he talking to? He's not talking to Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Scribes and he's not talking to the people with secular power in his day. He's talking to the ordinary men and women who have made their way to the edge of the Jordan River to be baptized by him. John the Baptist is not standing on a crowded street corner with plenty of foot traffic. He is well outside the city on the banks of the Jordan, so it takes some effort for people to get to him. The ones who do are people who are seeking faith. These are people who are responding to his call to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. These are common men and women of varying means, many of whom are actually quite poor who show up with open hearts and open minds. And he is talking to you and to me.

And his prophetic words are pretty harsh. Bear good fruit or risk being cut down and thrown into the fire, he says. And don't even think about relying on the fact that you are sons of Abraham. God can make stones become sons of Abraham. That's not going to get you off the hook. There's a sense of urgency in John's preaching. He says, “Even now, the ax is lying at the root of the trees.” We can almost hear him saying to us, “Don't count on the fact that you are a baptized Christian.” That alone is not going to get you off the hook. Actions count. Bearing good fruit counts. Being in right relationship with God counts. Being in right relationship with your neighbors...and that includes family members...counts.

The people listening to John then ask a very good question, “What should we do?” They're thinking to themselves, we've already presented ourselves for baptism. We've repented of our sins. So what are we supposed to do next? We can almost hear ourselves saying, “We come to church every Sunday...well almost every Sunday...and we've been baptized and we confess our

sins to God and ask for forgiveness and we participate in Holy Eucharist regularly. So what should we do?

Amazingly enough, the crowd doesn't turn away from John's harsh prophetic statements. Instead, they ask the same question: What then should we do?

John doesn't hesitate and his answers are addressed to us as well as to those in the crowd who have gathered in front of him. His answer has all to do with our actions. Our thinking is important. The state of our hearts is important, but right now, John is talking about our actions. How do we put our good thoughts and our open hearts into actions that others can experience? John is very specific.

"If you have two coats, share with someone." I took him literally and went straight to my closet and discovered that I could probably share with more than one someone! It doesn't have to be a coat. It can be anything that we have 'more than enough of'...and most of us have more than enough of many things. The message is 'share'...share everything you can with everyone you can. There are always people in close proximity to you who don't have as much in the way of material things as you do. We live in a culture that encourages us to accumulate. I read a recent statistic not too long ago that speaks to our penchant for accumulating 'stuff.' In 1950 the size of the average single family home in the U.S. was 1000 square feet. In 1970, the floor space in the average single family home was 1500 square feet. In 2000, the average size of a single family home was 2200 square feet. And by 2015 that number had climbed to 2800 square feet. Our average homes have almost tripled in size since 1950. We need them bigger to hold all the 'stuff' we have. The message to us: Share.

Turning back to the crowd standing before John the Baptist, the tax collector asked, "What should we do?" John was specific in his answer to him as well. The common practice among tax collectors was to collect more than the required amount and line their own pockets with the excess. In our world, it happens all the time and not just with the tax collector. It happens with the vendor who sells his product or service at a high price or increases the price by adding on to the bill at the last minute. What John is telling the tax collector...and telling us...is "Don't defraud anyone." And don't cut corners or pad the expense account. Be honest in your dealings with money.

And then the soldier wanted to know, "What should we do?" Again, John was very specific. Don't extort money from people by threatening them...in our day and age I think it's called protection money. And don't extort money from someone by making false accusations. John tells the soldier to be satisfied with his wages. And he tells us to be content with the compensation we have.

And then John shares the good news he has been sent to deliver. There is one coming after him that is far holier and more powerful. John believes he's not worthy to tie the sandals of the one who comes after him. John baptizes with water, but this one who comes after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And there will be judgement. There will be a calling to account. There will come a time when we will be held accountable for all we have done and for

all we have left undone. But we have an advocate in Jesus Christ...one who will intervene on our behalf...one who intervenes for us even now.

By being specific with his answers to the questions that were raised by those in the crowd and by the tax collector and the soldier, John showed us that faithful action does not have to be heroic. It does not have to be extraordinary. In fact, it needs to happen regularly and as a matter of course or as part of our routine. The message is: Serve where you are. He didn't tell the tax collector to sever his relationship with Rome or the local authorities. He didn't tell the soldier to become a pacifist. He didn't tell anyone in the crowd that they had to make radical changes in their lifestyle. But John did tell them...and us...to take their stand for their neighbor in the midst of...not apart from...the turbulence and the troubles of our times. John challenged them to do good because of, rather than in spite of, their compromised positions.

By speaking to the daily and ordinary experiences of the people in front of him and then sharing with them the expectations of the coming of the Messiah, John has made holy the mundane elements of daily living...not just to the crowd in front of him, but to us as well. What John wants us to do may not be heroic, but he tells us things to do that we can all do. Anyone can do them. To quote the very famous preacher and theologian John Wesley, ""Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." That's how you bear good fruit.

And if we struggle with doing those things, remember this. We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And we have been given the power of the Holy Spirit who can lead us into all kinds of situations that we think we cannot manage. And indeed, without the power and strength of the Holy Spirit we probably couldn't manage those situations on our own. But God is always with us.

The God who loves us unconditionally and eternally has provided us with all the resources we need in order to bear good fruit. With the strength and energy of these resources, we can do just that! All we need do is open our hearts and ask for the direction, the will and the energy.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.