

DEVASTATING TORNADOES OVER 250 MILES COVERING 6 STATES (KENTUCKY, TENN., ILLINOIS, ARKANSAS, MISSISSIPPI AND MISSOURI) OVER 100 PEOPLE KILLED. MILLIONS OF DOLLARS IN PROPERTY DAMAGE.

Sermon for Third Sunday of Advent December 12, 2021 Spelling in Out

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?”

Nobody wants to hear that on the Third Sunday of Advent. We have been carefully preparing for the most momentous occasion known to man...the birth of Jesus Christ...and we gather together for worship this morning and this is what we hear? A chastisement!!

Well, maybe the name-calling and the accusation is not as out of place as it seems. John the Baptist was, after all, a prophet and it is the job of a prophet to call the people out when they are not behaving as they should and to charge them with repentance and a change not only of action, but of heart and mind as well. Calling people out is what prophets are supposed to do. Prophets are supposed to redirect folks back to God. But has it ever occurred to any of us to wonder *why* all those people were making their way to the Jordan River to be baptized by John and to hear him preach? What was the motivation? What had stirred within them that they made the somewhat arduous 25 mile trek from Jerusalem to the Jordan River to hear John preach and to be baptized by him as well as chastised by him? It wasn't broadcast on CNN, so how did folks know about this phenomenon? How did they know about John the Baptist? And why were they anxious enough to see him and hear him and be baptized by him that they would walk 25 miles...one way...spend the night in or near the wilderness...and then walk the 25 miles back to Jerusalem? There was something immediate and compelling about John the Baptist and the wilderness is often a place where human need encounters God's gracious provision (for example, Exodus 13:21; Deuteronomy 8:16). Whatever their reasons, the crowds leave the relative comfort of home and venture out to the wilderness to be baptized by this prophet and hear him speak—even if his speech is severe and challenging. Whether they wanted to or not, those eager for a better understanding of their relationship with God and a deep desire to have that relationship be a more satisfying one were more than happy to make the trip and perfectly willing to hear John call them out for falling so far short of

what they were supposed to be as the children of God. John wasn't telling them anything about themselves that they didn't already know.

How different do you think we are? Don't we...each one of us...know at a gut level that we don't measure up....that we aren't practicing Christianity the way Jesus taught us to practice it? Aren't we on some level painfully aware of our own shortcomings? Maybe that's why we come to church to worship together on a regular basis. Our souls need it. Our souls need the nourishment and the reassurance of the words of Jesus and the expectations of God in order to feel nurtured, loved and forgiven. We come to church because we need to get reconnected with the Trinity in the presence of one another. We know on every level that we aren't doing it right. We know on every level that we are on so many occasions not living into our baptismal vows as we would want to. John spells out what repentance looks like: when peoples' hearts and minds are changed, their actions change, too, and so do their attitudes and their perspective on the world. Words are empty if they don't result in deeds. Fruitless trees will be chopped down and thrown into the fire. John gets us all fired up by telling us the truth about ourselves. For whatever reason, without the strength of Jesus leading us to follow him, we have little chance of living into those vows as we might want. And John the Baptist is forcing us to look that reality right in the eye and call it by its right name...sin....which is separation from God.

It's our own proclivity toward sin that separates us from God. God doesn't leave us. We leave God. And we know on an intellectual level that forgiveness is already offered by God, but it is our willingness to repent...to change direction...to think differently, to behave differently, to react differently to feel differently...that actualizes that gift of forgiveness offered by God. It's just waiting there for us like an unopened Christmas package. We know that we are already separated from God...cut off from God...by our own choices. If we weren't aware of how critical a situation separation is we have been given the experience of the pandemic that illustrates how we are cut off from those we love in real time....in the here and now. It's painful to be cut off from those we love and those who love us. And it wreaks havoc on our mental health. Most of us have been suffering from different levels of depression over the last several months...perhaps without even being fully aware. We need each other...and we need God.

The good news is that God sends One who is more powerful than even John who is formidable in his own right. But the One who follows John has gifts greater than the crowd can imagine. This Messiah brings a baptism of spirit and of fire: the very breath and power of God to change everything. That is very good news, indeed. That's something that requires careful preparation on our part.

John's preaching is harsh and perhaps surprising; it is jarring, particularly as an approach to the Christmas season; and it is challenging. His preaching of repentance is a direct assault on human living that in any way ignores the believer's actions or inactions towards his or her neighbor. It must also be insisted that John's message is not simply a call to belief or trust. John challenges his hearers to right relationships not just with God, but with their neighbors as well. You can't say grace over Sunday dinner and hate your next door neighbor.

Rather than either shrink back from or be angered by John's warning (common responses to prophetic discourse), the crowds instead ask a refreshingly pragmatic question: "What then shall we do?" How shall we respond to the Advent of the Messiah, which our preaching hails? What are the fruits of repentance, which we might bear? How can we meet the promise of the season, with real, meaningful expectation (cf. Luke 3:15)?

The crowd asks multiple times and in multiple ways: "What can we do?" "What should we do?" John responds to each reiteration of this question by offering specific action that equates to "fruits worthy of repentance." To the crowds as a whole whom we can assume were poor, John says: *If you have more than you need, whether in terms of food or clothing, you must share.* If you have two cloaks and someone else has none, give one away. To the tax collectors, who were often guilty of adding a little extra taxation on top of regional and Roman taxes, John says: *Stop stealing from your neighbors. Take only the tax you are required to take.* And to the soldiers John says: *No more using your power to take advantage of simple citizens by extorting more money from them or threatening them.* No hoarding, no skimming, no extortion.

Suppose the response of the people is: "But I'm not rich." The command is absolute: some people in your community don't have enough to survive, so if you have anything at all, share it. John calls his hearers to let God burn up our selfish desire to hoard our food and clothes even when our neighbor is hungry and shivering with cold. All that gets in the way of love for God and neighbor must go. Then we can live as God's own people, aflame with love and committed to justice.

Fidelity does not have to be heroic. There are opportunities to do God's will, to be God's people, all around us. These opportunities are shaped by our context: the roles in which we find ourselves and the needs of the neighbor with which we are confronted. But make no mistake, opportunities abound. John may have come from the wilderness, but the crowds — and we — live in the towns, villages, and marketplace, and these, too, can be places of testing and the arenas in which we offer our fidelity to God through service to our neighbor.

Tax collectors are not called to sever their relationship with Rome, nor are the soldiers exhorted to lives of pacifism. Even in light of impending eschatological judgment, they are called to serve where they are; to take their stand for neighbor amid, rather than apart from, the turbulence and trouble of the present age; and to do good because of rather than in spite of, their compromised positions.

We are all called to bear fruit as part of our repentance. In light of the coming day of judgment, God expects his people to behave, not merely believe. It is not enough to presume that because one is a child of the church, a 'good citizen' or a person of status, that one is secure before God.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's perceptive remark about human nature suggests a truer and more difficult answer: "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." Which one of us can claim truthfully to be all wheat and no chaff? When the stronger one winnows the wheat and burns the chaff, he will sift out and destroy the impurities within every person (cf. Luke 22:31). Like the water of baptism, the promised fire is a gift that cleanses.

Along those lines, theologian Karl Barth says much the same thing: "Baptism with the Spirit is concretely the divine cleansing and reorientation of men and women."

Though John's message seems radical to his hearers, he is quick to remind them that he is merely a messenger preparing the way for the stronger one. That one will baptize in the Holy Spirit and in fire.

Come, blessed Jesus, come. Make way the coming of the Lord. Prepare all hearts to make him room.

Through God's grace and generosity and love, the one who baptizes with fire and the Spirit will be among us soon and will stay with us forever.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.