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Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 3:7-18

December 15, 2024 Advent 3

***Isaiah 12:2-6***

***Surely God is my salvation;  
    I will trust and will not be afraid,  
for the Lord is my strength and my might;  
    he has become my salvation.”***

***3With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 4And you will say on that day:***

***“Give thanks to the Lord;  
    call on his name;  
make known his deeds among the nations;  
    proclaim that his name is exalted.***

***5Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;  
    let this be known in all the earth.  
6Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,  
    for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”***

***Luke 3:7-18***

***7John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8Therefore,*** ***bear fruits worthy of repentance, and 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. 9Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”***

***10And the crowds asked him, “What, then, should we do?” 11In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.” 12Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” 13He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” 14Soldiers 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.”***

***15As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John 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 strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His 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.”***

***18So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.***

The third chapter of Luke should be titled, “Meanwhile…” The first two chapters of Luke tell the story of the angel that came to Zechariah to foretell the birth of John the Baptist, and then the angel that came to Mary to foretell the birth of Jesus, and the travel of the holy family from Nazareth to Jerusalem and the angels that told the shepherds how to find the baby that was born. Then Jesus is named, and then Jesus is presented in the temple, and suddenly Jesus is 12 years old. Just two chapters. Then we turn the page, chapter three begins, and we think to ourselves, “Are there some pages missing?” because the text jumps immediately to an adult John the Baptist out in the wilderness. It's as if Luke got us started on Jesus and then sets him aside, like bread dough that is set for a while to rise.

Meanwhile, says Luke, here’s what John the Baptist has been up to. We turn that page to chapter three, and as we read last Sunday, John announced that he had something important to tell us. John first worked to get our attention. “Hey!” “Listen up!”

The other gospel accounts don’t give us much of John’s actual preaching. Folks who think that all things church, all things Christian, all things God, are sweet and nice and made of love, have never heard John the Baptist’s opening line! Imagine how it would be if I began my sermon with *“You brood of vipers!”* It seemed to work for John though. He continues, “*bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,”*cutting them off before they could tell themselves that they were in the clear because their ancestor was Abraham, he tells them right off, that’s not enough. John doesn’t reject that claim, he just says there must be more than just generational claims. In a way, John is expanding the definition of who he is calling. He’s calling more than just those who claim Abraham as their ancestor, he’s claiming everyone.

John asks, *“Who told you to flee from the coming wrath?”* being a little dramatic as he is. In other words, he wants each person in the crowd to ask themselves, why have you come? Why have you heard about this weirdo in the wilderness and come to see what he has to say? He hints that they must have felt some sense of wanting more, some sense of hoping that what John promises will be for them for a better future. More than the Pharisees and Sadducees in the Matthew version of this story, here in Luke, John is speaking to crowds that consist of tax collectors and soldiers. This wider audience (more than just the religious establishment, more than just children of Abraham) includes people with regular jobs, living regular lives. People who have some desire to live a better life. There is some hypocrisy of being trapped between an ideal of society and how society really works. For example, tax collectors who charge too much tax and pocket the rest because that’s how it’s done and their salaries aren’t enough. Soldiers who are employed by Roman authorities and extort money from people by threatening them with false accusations.

The crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers, all unlikely responders to John’s message, come to John and ask the question that runs throughout the gospel of Luke: “What should we do?” One commentator says, “John has a specific response for each – share clothing and food (crowds), collect justly (tax collectors), and be content without extortion (soldiers). All three examples depict acts of *generosity, justice, and contentment*.” (Troftgruben) I love that the good news according to John the Baptist, for this audience, is not a radical change about giving up all that they have and leaving all that they know and starting something beyond their own capabilities. John basically tells them to keep doing what they are doing, but do it better; do it in service to others; do it justly. John sends them back to their same lives, but with a better outward looking attitude. Commentator Chelsea Harmon says, “In Luke and Acts, repentance is not just a feeling—it means concrete acts of change. It amounts to recalculating the course of one’s life.”

It's like taking action on something, and then you get this google voice of God in your head saying “recalculating.” One time my brother and his eldest son were talking about how that google voice that we have in our gps system often gets kind of an attitude. Sometimes, after a wrong turn, you’ll hear her say “recalculating.” But after a few more wrong turns, she starts to say “re.calc.ulating.” My brother and his son began suggesting other things that that voice might say in response to the many times she has had to redirect us, including maybe just a pause and a heavy sigh. Could you imagine if God talked to us like that every time we made a choice? God sends us this way, we go another, and God says “recalculating.” But eventually, God just gives us that heavy sigh!

Bear fruits worthy of repentance, says John the Baptist. How do we do that? Maybe by doing exactly what we are doing, but better. With intention. We can do what our ordinary lives call us to do, but with a grander awareness of God’s purpose. Remember, repentance just means turning. Repentance doesn’t always mean to stop doing one thing. Sometimes repentance means adding and improving what we are already doing. Like making art without much thought, versus adding just one more line or one more color to make it better. Like making donations of clothing and supplies directly to families in need instead of making the same donations to a generic box in a parking lot. Like helping your parents or your neighbor without the begrudging attitude or feeling of superiority one might have. Like listening closely to someone’s desires instead of assuming we know what would make them happy.

Someone told me once, and I don’t know where the phrase originates, “When you meet someone’s need, you bring them happiness. When you meet someone’s desire, you bring them joy.” (unknown author)

Maybe living a life bearing good fruit, worthy of repentance, is not as complicated as we think. “[John the Baptist] basically sent every person who came to him back to his or her regular life, regular activities, regular vocation and then told each person, “Do what you’ve been doing but do it better, do it more honestly, do it as an act of service for others.”  Share what you have, John said.  Be honest and above board in your work, John said. Be faithful to whatever task is yours to perform in life, John said.” (Hoezze)

We don’t all need to go to monasteries or read more devotionals, or start new justice organizations, or even develop new spiritual practices, although all that is wonderful. For the crowds who sought out John the Baptist then, and those of us now who continue to prepare for the returning Christ, perhaps we can just *recalculate and realign our actions with God*. One commentator puts it this way: “Meeting God’s presence willingly in any situation is an act of repentance.” (Harmon)

Just imagine how hungry God must be for God’s people to join in God’s work. Let’s bring God some joy.

Amen.

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Troftgruben, Troy, Working Preacher, 2024,

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-37-18-6>