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Look Forward

Luke 3:7-18

When I first looked at the Lectionary Gospel reading for today, I couldn't help but think that on the surface at least there is a disconnect between our lesson from Luke and this advent season. One commentator has expressed my feelings well:

There are undoubtedly many folks in our pews this week who are beginning to wonder about this whole season of advent....why...is the church making us listen (two weeks in a row!) To stories about a wild-eyed preacher from the wilderness who doesn't yell just at the powers-that-be...but all of the sincerely open people who have bothered to come out here in the middle of nowhere to listen to his message of a coming judgment? Admittedly, it's hard to connect this message easily with the theme of "joy" given to this third Sunday in advent (Kate Huey, "Look Forward," Sermon Seeds, UCC.org).

So why do we, then, have another reading about John the Baptist losing it in the wilderness?

As I said last Sunday, what the advent season is really all about is preparation. Advent comes before Christmas. Children know how it is with everyday life: you've got to eat your vegetables before you can have dessert. And so "...the church makes us listen first--not instead, but first--to this rough-voiced, almost reckless prophet who wouldn't last five minutes in most of our pulpits" (Kate Huey).

But the point of advent is not to depress us and drag us down but rather to help us move slowly and thoughtfully toward the great celebration that is to come--the incarnation, the birth of the Christ Child. In The Message, Eugene Peterson speaks of it as "the word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood."

You and I know about preparation. Think of what happens before you take any kind of extended trip or vacation. You go through a checklist of items needed to be accomplished: stopping the paper, finding someone to feed the animals, filling out the form to collect the mail, getting your hair cut, going to the bank, dragging out the suitcases. On and on it goes....while some of the preparation is drudgery--something ya gotta do--the whole process in fact builds our sense of anticipation. On December 9th, we talked about "making ready." well, preparation is all that is required to get us on the road. But what lives on in our minds, of course, is what happens after we get there. I don't remember a thing about getting ready to take my children to Disney world years ago. But I still have fond memories about when we first stepped into the "Magic Kingdom"!

So John's message to us this morning is very much one of needing to eat our vegetables, of preparing our minds and hearts for this magnificent gift that is to come. At the time John began preaching, things in the Roman Empire were completely out of whack. The

empire--through force and greed--kept grabbing lands and wealth. Abuse of power by the state as well as by those connected with religious institutions was rampant. If you hear echoes of those ancient times in our modern times, it's only because the world--then and now--continues to be filled with very human creatures.

One scholar says the world in John's day was being held upside down by those on top....when I moved to Bangor in 2001, I desperately needed a new car--the transmission was going out in "the blue devil," as my son so aptly named it. As I made the rounds of car dealers, I heard a familiar refrain: "You've got an upside down situation here. You owe more on the car than it's worth." That's what was going on in the roman empire: an upside down situation.

You will remember that last Sunday I spoke about the 450-year silence between the prophet Malachi and the preaching of John. God was not dead during that period. God was still speaking, but it was ever-so-quietly.

Some of you have heard me tell about the sanctuary fire I had during advent when I was pastoring near Austin, Texas, in the early 1980's. Each Sunday we lighted the big red Christmas candles in the window sills. (You will note that ours are lighted by bulbs!) At the end of that fateful advent service, three different people checked the candles to be sure the flame was out. But what no one could see was that the flame was still burning deep inside. And so the flame in the well of that one candle continued to burn through the afternoon and evening and the next morning. Finally about one o'clock on Monday afternoon, the flame finally hit the Styrofoam base and the fire exploded. Fortunately, we were able to save the building, with a lesson learned.

The long, slow burning of that candle speaks to the way things were in the First Century and beyond. That still small flame of faith was burning dimly for 450 years. Suddenly the gospel message caught fire with the preaching of John the Baptist.

The people who crowded around John in the wilderness were not the people in power. They were anxious for a word of hope, anxious for good news. That is why they sought out this wild and wooly evangelist. Those faith ancestors believed that John could bring them a word they needed to hear. "John knew that the people ...had to be prepared for God's new creation. They...had to be reoriented to God's rule instead of empire" (Herzog, New Proclamation 2006).

So what is John's word to the people? In verse seven of luke 3 they ask him, "What then should we do?" John answers the question as their pastor, as the shepherd of the flock: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." When the tax collectors come to be baptized, John speaks to what they do professionally: "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers who ask what they should do are told, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

In one writer's commentary on this passage, she says that the winning power of what John tells the people is that he offers *ample instruction, that is so down-to-earth, so everyday life, so...doable*. He doesn't tell the people to get back to church, to overthrow the Romans, to

transform the world in some sudden, drastic revolution. No, he tells them the same things that my parents told their nine children: "Share with one another. Be kind to one another. Don't fight. Be fair. Don't hoard, or lord it over one another (Kate Huey). In a real sense, John is telling the people the way to really turn the world upside down is to have a society based on justice and fairness and goodness.

In his teaching and preaching, John sets the stage for the Messiah--for a new kind of just peaceful world. By coming to earth in the humblest of circumstances, God models for us what is to be most valued in life. So John is singing an ancient song--one that the Hebrew people know instinctively about social justice and personal generosity. It will take the birth of Jesus to cause those smoldering embers to burst into flame again.

The question that the people ask of John is the same question you and I are asking, of course: "What then shall we do?" in a few short weeks we shall be making New Year's resolutions, but the time to get ready for doing that is now. Advent offers to us a season of getting ready: of preparing the Christ Child room and preparing ourselves for life in 2019 and beyond. John gives us--and the world--a message we desperately need to hear:

Even as we remember our calling as Christians, so too we are reminded that this third Sunday of advent has been known as the "Joy Sunday" since the Fourth Century. That's why we light the rose candle, called the gaudete candle, in the advent wreath this morning....in a poem which he wrote called "Where is your joy?", W. Maurice King spoke to the need to remember what calls us here:

*Walking down the street, looking at the people
Makes me want to cry out, "Where is your joy?"
Passing by a church, I look up to the steeple
And shout with all my voice, "Where is your joy?"
Joy and real gladness, almost nowhere.
Now I cry louder, "Where is your joy?"
It hasn't always been this way,
But it seems it's here to stay.
Where is the joy?
Wait! I think it's coming back
All of life can't be this black.
Yes, I know it's a fact--
Christ is my joy;
The only joy (Dr. Rodney E. Wilmoth)*

May it be so for us!

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