

WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?

3 Advent – C December 16, 2018

Luke 3:7-18

Last week, Luke the Evangelist gave us an introduction to John. Placing him among the historical figures of his time, showed how John's ministry happened, at the right time, in order for John to fulfill his calling to "prepare the way."

John's ministry is a prophecy fulfilled: Preparing the way for the Coming One: "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The Word of the Lord comes, not to the who's who list of the day, but rather to John, son of Zechariah; not in Rome or Jerusalem, but rather, "in the wilderness."

That was Luke introducing us to John. Today we hear from John himself who is either shouting angrily to the crowds that come to him for baptism; or he is helping them be honest with themselves. How can they face their fears in the midst of a world that is so hostile? How can they admit they have caved in to the charms and charmers of this world and found themselves heading in the wrong direction? And how can they turn their lives around and live into this promise that "*all flesh shall see the salvation of God?*"

This text is timely for this second half of the season of Advent and for these days in history. This text remains more timely than ever. Let me explain. Three years ago, when we read this text from Luke's gospel, there had been a terrorist attack in Paris that had taken place in the previous month. Oh, for things to be different today. Earlier this week there was a terrorist attack in the Paris Christmas Marketplace. That, coupled with unrest and riots in the streets makes Paris, not unique, or particularly cursed. Rather it is a microcosm of what is happening all around us, causing us to want to "flee from the wrath to come." Six years ago, as Father Tom recalled, Madeleine Hsu granddaughter of members of All Saints' Church, was one of the many children gunned down at Sandy Hook. Every time another school shooting happens, we are not so much shocked as we are saddened; because it is a regular occurrence. Someone, please tell me how I can flee from the wrath to come.

John might not be scolding those who approach him as much as he is asking more of a rhetorical question: "Why are you running, and do you know what you are running from?" And perhaps even more important: "If you run, is there something or someone you can run to?" Perhaps John sees people looking for more of an escape (From their enemies? From God? From themselves?). Like most people who are seeing change, a new thing in their lives, they are hoping to replace what is less than pleasant with something that is safer, warmer, less judgmental, more comforting, more affirming.

Running away from that which you fear won't make the source of the fear go away. Running to a person or place might mean trying to get away from the present reality in order to find something better. John's solution is for people to do an about-face: to repent, to turn their lives around. If your life stinks, chart a new course. Change direction.

John admonishes those who come to him for baptism of cleansing and repentance to "bear fruit worthy of repentance," which is to say: "Show what you're really made of, and whose you are." Because that is the only way that we will make a difference. That is the only way we will change our world for the better.

When tragedy strikes, we try to return to some sense of "normal" afterward, as a way to move forward with our lives. But such changes also mean that things will always be different in some way from now on. Life in "the new normal" is, by definition, going to be different. So can we make

something better out of that new reality? And, by better, I don't mean ignoring the tragedy or loss that brought us to where we are today. Rather, can there be redemption even in the midst of (or the aftermath of) the *worst things* that can happen?

Tragedy, terror, and torment do not have to define us. But it takes a leap of faith to step out of fear, sadness, or loneliness. Moving forward means acknowledging that what has happened has happened. We can't change the past. But we can live in this moment and we can plan our future. The ones who came to John for baptism weren't just running away. Rather I think they were looking for hope, and to know that they mattered.

Thinking about John and baptism has me thinking about my own baptism. I realize that it's over 2,000 years later, and you and I are not the same group of followers who sought out John. Yet, our understanding of baptism then and now reveals some similarities. We speak of "washing" in the rite: a cleansing, and the conferring of a new life in the sacrament. We also think of baptism as inclusion into the family of God—our assurance that we belong, no matter what. When the service ends today, you will be dismissed with a sending of the baptized: "Go in peace. Serve the Lord." And you'll carry that mini-mission statement into the world.

This faith in which we are baptized is not an escape from the world, but rather God's way of equipping us to engage with the world around us. We don't run away, but rather run forward, as we seek to bring the glimpses of the kingdom to this world. Baptism doesn't hide us away from the powers and authorities that oppress and distress people; but rather, we recognize that we have been anointed for service in the midst of whatever things attempted to rule over our lives.

Our calling as God's people in Christ is to carry Christ into the streets and for us to be visible signs of what that Christ-like love looks like. For so many of us, that love plays out in service to others through many of the ministries here in the Outer Banks. Additionally, it happens when we return a portion of what we have received in order that the church might take steps both great and small to make "good news" real for those who need to hear it and feel it.

Great things can happen when believe that we are carrying the Good News with us into this world. We see potential, even in the most ordinary acts and actions. When the people asked John, "What can we do?" John didn't speak of great heroic measures, but of rather ordinary, almost mundane tasks to effect change: Tax collectors, take no more than what is due to you; soldiers, don't extort money from people and learn to be happy with your wages; people with more coats than you need: share with those who do not have any. With these and other exhortations, John did what? Frightened people? Intimidated them? No. He proclaimed the Good News.

In the midst of the most life-changing event ever to be announced, John told the people to be the very best they could be. The One who is coming will be even more about getting your lives clean and making your paths straight. And those who follow him will find strength in adversity, resolve in times of crisis, and peace in times of unrest. Because the Good News of Jesus—the news that came, not to kings or high priests, but to an ordinary man named John—can make those very things possible and visible for us. And when we see the possibilities and run with them, then great things will happen through us.

Today, we commit our time, our talent, and our treasure in response to the new life that we have been given. It won't make the problems of this world go away; but it will be our statement of faith as we go about healing our world, knowing that Christ walks with us on our journey. Our full potential is yet to be seen, because Jesus has promised to be with us all the way. Amen.