

December 12th, 2021

Year C; Third Advent

Philippians 4: 4-7

Canticle 9 The Song of Isaiah

Luke 3: 7-18

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. 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. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

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

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

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

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

John the Baptist makes people uncomfortable; he does not soften any of his

message, he will not sugar coat the urgent message of our faith. And if you saw him on the street, or by the River Jordan, you might be tempted to give him a wide berth.

That tiny baby that Zechariah held, treasured in his arms last week, has grown up. John lived in the wilderness until now, when he knows he is called to go into civilization, and live out the prophecy his elderly Dad, Zechariah, made about him, that he would preach repentance, and he would prepare the way, prepare the people, prepare us for the arrival of our Savior, Jesus.

Zechariah said, as he held the newborn John:

*You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
To give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.*

Despite these lofty prophecies, John the Baptist still makes people uncomfortable. And we like being comfortable, a lot.

When I was young, I was part of a mission trip to Russia. A group of about 50 young people, ages 13-30, Americans and Europeans.

We travelled to Moscow and then into the countryside to help renovate a monastery the Soviet Union had just returned to the Orthodox Church. In our travels and work we stayed in numerous places, including 50 cots lined up at the monastery, and on the floors of apartments when we could not find hotels. We bathed only occasionally, usually at group banas, and usually with few towels.

We traveled for over three weeks, each with a large backpack to carry all we needed.

I look back on that time and shake my head at present-day-me. Now, when I travel, even for one night, I need to have along my special pillow, my sound machine that provides ocean sounds so I can sleep, if it is winter, I need my humidifier, and if I am away more than one night, I'll also have to take my favorite blanket.

I do not adapt nearly as well as when I was young; I like to be comfortable.

Our opening collect calls for God to:

"...with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us..."

And one of the sins that sorely hinders us, is our tendency towards comfort, perhaps in our overnight accommodations, but even more, in our faith life. In our faith life, we can shy away from things that make us uncomfortable, like the suffering and needs of others. We want to help, but we are uneasy with having our hearts broken by the pain in our world.

John the Baptist does not care if our hearts get broken, that we feel more of the pain of the world. He wants us to feel it and to help.

As folks came to be baptized, they heard him preach and challenge them, and they say to John:

"What then should we do?"

And John answers them, and us:

"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

When the tax collectors ask: *"What then should we do?"*

John answers them: *"Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."*

When soldiers ask: *"What then should we do?"*

John answers them:

"Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

And today we come to river and ask John too:

What then should we do?"

And John tells us the same: share and share generously with those in need. Do not take advantage of others, be honest. But most of all, open your hearts, be uncomfortable, hear, feel the world's pain, for your God knows that pain, and we need to also.

I read the Richmond newspaper daily, both to keep up with the doings of the city we lived in for so many years, but also to make myself uncomfortable.

I don't want to, but I need to sit with the folks from Central America who were crammed into a truck that crashed in Mexico, killing and injuring many.

I don't want to, but I need to sit with folks in Kentucky who were hit by the deadly December tornadoes this week, coming in the fearful darkness, so sudden and overwhelming.

I don't want to, but I need to sit with folks in southside Richmond who are getting caught in the crossfire of gun violence, children and adults dying while sitting outside or playing.

I don't want to, but I need to hear how folks do not dare to enjoy time outdoors in the city I lived in, just miles from our old house.

I used to read the front page after I got into bed at night but learned I could not sleep afterwards. So, I read it first thing in the morning now, carrying folks' stories with me through the day.

Our world, our homes, our county, our state, our country, our world hold much beauty and much pain.

On this 3rd Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist shouts to us, John shouts to us to repent, to turn from our longing for comfort and our longing for distance, and to join him in knowing the pain of the world, to sit with that pain, to pray for those in pain. And to be ready when we ask:

"What then should we do?" to hear John's answers.

For as we join John in sharing and helping and listening, we join him too in preparing the way for our Savior, in preparing our hearts, our uncomfortable broken hearts, for the arrival of our Savior.

Amen.