

December 12, 2021
Rev. Kerry Smith

What Then Should We Do?
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Luke 3:7-18

New Revised Standard Version

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.

This Sunday is the third Sunday of Advent and it is known as Gaudete Sunday which is a Latin word meaning rejoice. We call today Joy Sunday. When Advent first began it was six weeks of preparing for Christmas, similar to how Lent is six weeks of preparing for Easter. But, six weeks is a long time to deny yourself and a break was needed. So, halfway through Advent, we have time to stop being penitent and to focus on joy at the birth of Jesus. It is an opportunity for us to stop fretting about all we still haven't done to prepare for Christmas and instead think about all of the good things life has given us.

We hear today again from John the Baptist who would have been a blast as your coworker or your neighbor (just kidding!). He is looking for fruits worthy of repentance, he isn't looking for apples or bananas. He is looking for changed behavior. He is looking for more than just sorrow or remorse. The crowds asked him, what then should we do? God is breaking into our world and we must bear fruits worthy of repentance. What does that look like?

Repentance is about a change of perspective, changing how you see things. Does the way you live your life reflect that you are seeing things differently? Does the way you live your life, the decisions that you make, what you do, does it reflect that you have a changed perspective, that God is here? That God is present?

John addresses individuals from different groups – to the tax collectors, to the soldiers, to those who have. It is specific and not just a general hey, be nice. John says to the tax collector, you have this opportunity to collect more than you should – stop doing that. John says to the soldier, you have this practice of extortion - stop it. John says to those who have more than someone else - share. Practice hospitality. John gives clear evidence of what that fruit looks like. John isn't saying that there are a few bad apple tax collectors and a few bad soldiers and they need to stop being bad. John is saying that collecting more than you should and extortion are built into the system and it is a systemic problem.¹

If you're a tax collector, and you stop taking more of your fair share of money, that makes it harder for all of the other tax collectors. If you're a soldier who has given up extortion as a way of padding your income in the Roman military, it makes it harder to recruit other soldiers. It makes the other soldiers mad at you. It makes sense why Herod puts John into prison

¹ Thanks to Sermon Brainwave for their insights. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4gDvk4OOLQ>

because it is going to be bad for business if John the Baptist keeps exposing all of the systemic problems built into the system.

It's easy for us to get behind John going after the wealthy or the exploiters that everyone knows are exploiters. But, I wonder if we can make his words personal to us? Where are the places where I am excused for using my power to exclude others? John sees society as broken and he wants us to know that there is no advantage that we have that will save us. We are all in need of God's love and God's grace.

The hard part of this Joy Sunday and of John the Baptist's word to us is that when we see as God sees and when we see whom God sees, we are going to be met with rejection. Herod shuts John the Baptist up in prison. After Jesus' first sermon, the people want to throw him off a cliff. Rejection is part of this reality. It might sound all well and good to talk about the advent of God, about God coming to us, but the reality is a lot of people don't want God that close. They don't want God in their world, even though they may say that they do.

So, what does it mean to prepare the way of the Lord? John talks about baptism. Baptism is a new or renewed allegiance to God. It is a commitment to this kind of change in perspective. Advent is a reminder for us that we are trapped between a past we can't return to and a future that is uncertain. And it takes guts to live here, in this hard space between anticipation and realization. What then should we do? We may be comfortable how we are right now, but we are not called to remain that way. Learning and developing as a human being is about being uncomfortable. A friend told me this week, "let your heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God."

The people asked, what then should we do? Jesus walked around his community asking two questions: who is religion forgetting and who is power oppressing?² Jesus asked those questions and then gathered those people around him, at that time it was the lepers, the tax collectors, the prostitutes. Jesus gathered them up, ate with them, spoke out for them, and stood between them and those who were throwing stones at them over and over and over again. Jesus gathered those hurting, marginalized, pushed to the edges people. Jesus gathered them all up, ate with them, shepherded them, took care of them, and walked with them towards the empire. We are called to take care, to fight for the people in our communities, as we challenge the power structures. To walk together without fear. There are more of us than there are of them. Who is religion forgetting in our communities? Who is power oppressing? Who can we get between the stone throwers to protect? It seems to me that it is immigrants, queer kids, brown and black people, disabled people.

One of the passages from Kate Bowler's book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved* that I turn to often says, "Joy persists and we are invited to soak it in. Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard. We are not limitless. Everything is not possible. The Kingdom of God is not here yet. We are people with good news that God is here and we are loved. It is enough. You are perfect, just as you are. You are the gospel. The good news is that God is here and you are loved. God is here, you are loved. That is enough. That is the good news." Thanks be to God, Amen.

² <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/queer-freedom-how-can-we-be-both-held-and-free/id1564530722?i=1000527944855>