

December 13, 2009 Advent III  
Calvary Presbyterian Church  
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Zephaniah 3:14-20  
Luke 3:7-18

In this season of waiting, time somehow gets all mixed up. During Advent, we are waiting, with ancient Israel, for the Messiah to appear among us. We listen again to the words of the prophets making promises that God will not abandon us; that God will come to be with us; that God will deliver us from oppression and despair. The prophets all warn us to be ready, God is coming.

And, we are waiting, with John on the banks of the Jordan, for Jesus to appear and begin his ministry. We know that Jesus is about to appear, and John warns us to get ourselves ready to hear all that he has to teach us. We know the story and we're still waiting for him to begin the journey— knowing it will lead to the cross, but also knowing that we can rejoice because the crucified Christ rose again and carried our humanity back into the very heart of God.

And, we are waiting, with the rest of the Church, for Jesus to come again. We have been warned to keep ourselves ready. We realize that the kingdom that the prophets expected and that Jesus preached is still “at hand,” just beyond our reach, even 2000 years after his sojourn with us on this earth. We recognize the signs of the kingdom, but we know this isn't it and we long for the time when the lion will lie down with the lamb, and, “the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters that cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

In the season when we are waiting for the beginning of the story, we started at the beginning of the end—listening to Jesus preach at the Temple in Jerusalem about the end of the world just before he was arrested. And today we are sent to the end of the beginning. This lesson about John the Baptist is the last episode before Jesus comes to be baptized in the River Jordan and begins his ministry; the very end of the prologue, if you will.

Bethlehem seemed to be optional to the gospel writers—only Luke will tell us that beloved story about Mary and Joseph going home to Bethlehem to be counted by the Roman Emperor and angels and shepherds finding the baby in a manger, only Luke thinks it is important to tell us all that, but John the Baptist is required. All four of the gospel writers make us stop on the banks of the Jordan and listen to what John has to say before we are ready to encounter the adult Jesus. The way to Jesus is through the desert where we hear John preaching about sin and repentance.

I know you were relieved last week when we tiptoed cautiously around this topic and focused on what John had to say about straightening out the pathway for God's arrival, but we're back there again. Advent requires that we pay attention to John, so let's join the crowds down on the riverbank and listen now to what John has to tell us. Luke 3: 7-18.

## What, Then, Shall We Do?

I was so glad to see the Christmas Decoration when I came in this morning. Many thanks to all those who came in yesterday to arrange flowers and erect the tree and all the other touches that I am noticing all around the building. I'm ready for Christmas to be here. The decorations in the Target are already a bit limp and bedraggled. They've been up far too long. And, it feels to me like we have been "doing Advent" for way too long. We just lit the third candle a few moments ago, but I'm as ready as I plan to get, so let's get on with it. I'm tired of waiting. It's getting tedious. Sue is itching to play the Christmas carols. And, I certainly don't want to spend one more morning talking to you about John the Baptist. We are supposed to be rejoicing this morning; that's the theme; and John is so depressing.

He's such a minor character in this story, but Luke gives as much attention to John's family story as he does to Jesus' birth narrative. The angel, Gabriel, talks to John's father, Zechariah, in the same way that Gabriel talks to a young woman named Mary—but at even greater length—making promises to both of them about the arrival of a most unexpected child. It's to John's pregnant mother, Elizabeth, that Mary sings the famous song that begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior" (1:46). The similar song that old Zechariah sings when John is born, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them," (1:68) is an even longer one with the same theme. John's birth story ends with, "the child grew and became strong in spirit" (1:80), which is very like the announcement that the boy Jesus, "increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man" (2:52).

Still, John is only in the first act of this drama. If this was a TV serial, he would be the one who gets killed in the opening episode to ignite our interest in the story—you know, like Mary Alice on *Desperate Housewives*—who still seems to be an important character in the drama even through the story began at her funeral three or four years ago. John has done his part in the story, before Jesus says one word. His job is to get the story going, and then we don't need him anymore—although we are called to notice that what he is preaching gets him killed. All that talk about the ax lying at the root of the tree is treasonous talk if you remember how often the nation of Israel is referred to as a tree by the prophets—a symbol of permanence in a parched landscape like Palestine. King Herod took John's words seriously—seriously enough to arrest him and throw him in prison—seriously enough that the king's wife couldn't be satisfied with having John in prison and concocted a plot to get him beheaded. But, John won't quite go away; from the story or from Herod's imagination. When Herod hears about Jesus, his first thought is that John had somehow been resurrected. And years later, the Apostle Paul will discover disciples of John in the far distant reaches of the Greek world, who had never heard about Jesus at all.

Nevertheless, we talked about John the Baptist last week—surely that's enough for one year. I don't much want to talk about sin this morning, and I'm fairly sure you don't much want to hear about it either. By mistake one summer, I sat in on a workshop called "Beyond the Garden—some new and old thoughts about Original Sin." I hadn't registered properly for a continuing education event, and this was the only workshop still open, nobody ever wants to talk about sin—even at a church gathering. The leader was wonderful. We worked hard on the Adam and

Eve story and wondered together about why none of the Old Testament prophets ever picked up any references to that story in any of their long harangues to the crowds about sin—their individual sin or the sin of the community as a whole. Did you notice that this morning, the Old Testament reading from Zephaniah—one of the gloomiest of the gloomy doomsday prophets—was a message of grace?

“Rejoice and exult with all your heart...the Lord has taken away the judgments against you. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.... God will rejoice over you with gladness, God will renew you in his love... God promises to deal with all your oppressors, to save the lame, to gather the outcast, and to bring you home!” (Zeph 3:14-20).

On this day, in the Advent season when time is all jumbled up, we hear a message of mercy and grace from the Old Testament and a message of judgment from the gospel reading.

John would have failed the preaching course at any Presbyterian seminary. You can't stand before a congregation and call them, “a brood of vipers,” if you expect them to hear anything else that you might have to say. But then this crowd by the river hadn't come to hear soothing words from John. They hadn't stopped by casually because it was the socially correct thing to do on a rainy morning in December. They came because they were afraid. They were afraid that the world was going so horrendously wrong that God would surely step in—they were praying frantically that God would come, and afraid that he might. They believed God was coming any moment. They were afraid that their connection to the family of Abraham wouldn't be enough to protect them from the wrath of an angry God on the loose in their world. They wanted to know what they could do to be ready.

There is a wonderful news clip of some kids skateboarding over a crack in the pavement near Candlestick Park in San Francisco on the day of the last big earthquake there. The World Series was just about to begin—with San Francisco playing Oakland—and the whole Bay area shook. The Wikipedia entry insists that it was in 1989, although my guess would have been off by nearly ten years—talk about time getting jumbled up. Anyway, the kids are having a fine time swooshing back and forth jumping over the crack and the adults are all standing around watching and laughing together; until, a patrol car squeals into the frame and the police officer gets out and starts talking on his bull horn—“Don't you know there has been an earthquake? Don't you know there isn't any electricity? We won't have any water for a week. Don't you know what terrible danger you are all in here in this neighborhood? Get away from here. You can't keep jumping over this crack in the street—it's about to get wider and wider. There will be aftershocks. The gas lines might burst at any moment. This is the epicenter of a disaster. Wait until you see the pictures of the collapsed freeways. You can't keep going back and forth across the fault line.”<sup>1</sup>

That's what John is preaching. There has been a seismic shift in the landscape. I'm here to wash you up from the disaster you have made of your own lives, from the havoc that you have already experienced, but someone else is coming, is already on the way, who will light fires that will matter for all eternity. Decide today what side of that fault line you want to be on—the crevice between good and evil; between saved and damned is about to be thrown apart so far that no one

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Dr. Tom Long who shared this video and this thought in a lecture at Wesley Seminary, Oct 4, 1999.

will be able to jump back and forth. Decide now. Decide today. Which side will you choose? Where will you want to be when there is no longer the possibility to cross back and forth? The fault line is about to become a chasm. Choose today to live on the side of the fault line where there is forgiveness and redemption. Live your life so that it will show clearly which side of the fault line you have decided to live on.

And crowd around John says, "What, then, should we do?" John gives them very specific instruction. His words are location and vocation specific. He doesn't say give all you have to the poor and follow me. He doesn't say come out with me into the wilderness and spend your life in prayer and contemplation. He says, whatever you do, do it remembering the needs of the poor and never taking advantage of your position in life. Avoid the particular temptations that your own circumstances put before you. If you have plenty, share. If your job is to collect money, do your job, but don't rob anyone. If you have power over people, treat them fairly. Live on the side of the fault line where there is forgiveness for every sin, and redemption offered over and over again. Once you decide to live on that side, the fruits of your life will show the genuineness of your repentance.

The most amazing piece of John's story is the very last line. This judgment that John preaches is Good News. It is gospel. This is the Good News: God loves you so much he will not put up with your sin anymore. God loves you so much he will not allow you keep wandering in the darkness all alone. God will come to rescue you. God will come to hold you up. God will come to set things right. Judgment is not something to be afraid of, it is the Good News.

Rejoice children of Abraham, the Lord has taken away the judgment against you. The Lord is in your midst and you shall fear disaster no more.

Rejoice, children of Abraham, the word of God has come to John, son of Zechariah, out in the wilderness. The Messiah comes to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Rejoice, children of Abraham, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. This is all Good News!

Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel has come to you—at just the right time.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> All this time talk is from "Proclaiming the Advent Texts," by David Bartlett in *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2006, p3.