

“What Should We Do?”

Luke 3:7-18

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Advent III

In this season of Advent we are preparing our hearts for the coming of Jesus. We are also preparing for the celebration of Christmas, of course; decorations are being hung, gifts are being bought, food is being prepared. But *preparing our hearts for the coming of Jesus* and *preparing for the celebration of Christmas* are two very different things, and they should not be confused with each other. One is more important than the other. We worship *Jesus*, not Christmas; following our Lord and Savior should matter much more to us than the annual celebration and all the traditions surrounding his birth.

Our scripture passages in Advent invite us to stay focused on *preparing our hearts for the coming of Jesus*. There is a redemption yet to come, and there are things we need to do to prepare for it. I know that some of you are anxious to get to Christmas, to Bethlehem, to the angels and shepherds and magi. We *will* get there, but not ... yet. Right now there is some more *preparation* we need to do.

Last week we took a look at John the Baptist – at the prophecies that pointed to him, at the mission God gave him to prepare the way of the Lord, at the two aspects of his ministry, *preaching* and *baptism*. His preaching was about *repentance*; the baptism he offered was an *initiation* into a new way of life. Today we’re going to take a second look at John, this time delving more deeply into the specific content of his preaching ministry. What did he have to say – and what does it mean for us? His words helped people back then to prepare for the coming of the Messiah; his words will also help *us*, here and now, prepare for the Messiah’s coming. But be warned: his words are not for the faint of heart!

“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?’” In Luke’s version of the gospel story, these are the first words John says. They are not the most welcoming words in the world. It’s not, “Hi, welcome; I’m so glad you’re here!” It’s “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” If we were giving out awards for hospitality, I’m quite sure John wouldn’t win any! For John was not primarily interested in being *hospitable*. John was primarily interested in being *faithful*. Faithful to God, who has a very high bar for anyone who tries to follow him. John understood that God is a righteous judge, the supreme arbiter over all human words and deeds. Everything we say and do ultimately will be judged by Almighty God. That is a classic Christian doctrine, one of the central tenets of our Christian faith, woven into a multitude of creeds and confessions through the centuries, and yet, so often, we live our lives as if we really don’t *believe* it. All those times we knowingly turn aside from the ways of God, perhaps trusting a bit too much in God’s mercy and grace, or perhaps justifying in our minds things that never should be justified, or perhaps every now and then giving into our indulgences, even though deep in our

hearts we really know better. John knew: there is a *wrath* that is to come. The wrath of *God*. Some people mistakenly think that the wrath of God only shows up in the Old Testament. That is absolutely not the case, and it demonstrates how poorly people really know and understand the New Testament. You can find references to the wrath of God in three of the four Gospels, four of the letters of Paul (especially in his letter to the Romans), and throughout the book of Revelation. The idea is that there is a day that is coming in which God will execute *righteous judgment* over the whole earth. Those people who do evil *will* be subject to God's judgment, while those people who pursue God's goodness and justice *will* be rewarded. The day of God's wrath will *not* be pretty. Unrepentant sinners will wish that day had never come. But for all of God's faithful, that day will lead to tremendous joy and peace.

So John greets the crowds coming to him for baptism with words about God's wrath. Whatever their lives have been like, whatever their choices in the past have been, he is laying before them now the ultimate choice: are you going to persist in your sinful ways, or are you truly willing to *change your behavior*? "Bear fruits worthy of repentance," John says. Perhaps he senses that some of these people are not coming with hearts that are ready to repent of all their sins. Perhaps some of them are only coming because their friends are coming, or their spouse is coming, or simply because they are curious and have no real intention of doing the hard work of repentance. Some of those people may truly *need* to hear about God's wrath. Some of them may not be aware of how much jeopardy they are really in.

"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." The Jews who are coming to John cannot simply take refuge in the fact that they are Jews. They may think of themselves as "God's chosen people," but the fact that they are biologically descended from Abraham ultimately means *nothing*. For "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." That is, God is able to "adopt" people into Abraham's family, in a *spiritual* sense, even if they are not children of Abraham in a *biological* sense. God made it possible for *anyone* to follow Jesus, to become spiritual offspring of Abraham, children of God *by faith*. What matters is *not* the faith of your parents, or your ethnic heritage, or your country of origin. What matters is how you choose to live your life, how you put your *faith* into *practice*.

John continues. "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." Do you hear those words? Do you *really* hear them? You are like a tree. There is an ax ready to chop you down. It is *God's* ax. It is a *holy* ax. God will spare the trees that bear good fruit – the people who earnestly strive to live their life in a good, just, and holy way. God will chop down and burn the trees that bear bad fruit – the people who wantonly and unrepentantly engage in behavior that is selfish, greedy, unjust, corrupt, hurtful, lustful, or downright evil. The ax is in *God's* hands, not ours. We are not the ones who get to decide our fate.

These words quicken the hearts of John's hearers. They should quicken ours, as well. They ask: "What then should we do?" They sincerely want to know: *what do we need to do to be spared God's ax*? John answers: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." This is just *one* of the many things that John said, but it is one of the most important. There should not be such a great dichotomy between the wealthy and the poor. There should not be people freezing in the streets while others live in palatial homes. There should not be people looking for scraps of food in trash cans while others dine in luxury. How many coats do you personally own? Can you spare one of them for a man or a woman or a child who doesn't have any? How much food are you going to have on your table for Christmas dinner? Can you spare some of it, or some of your financial

resources, so that someone who doesn't have any food can have something to eat? There is a long history in Christianity of giving assistance to the poor and needy. There are reasons why we participate in clothing and food drives. Simply put, this is one of the *primary* things we Christians are called to do.

Some of the people who came out to see John were tax collectors. These people collected tolls, tariffs, and similar taxes on behalf of the Romans. In this period of Roman history, these tax collectors typically had to pay a set amount to their Roman overlords. They would be responsible for collecting that amount, plus covering their own expenses, and could bring in a profit for themselves. This was not a well-regulated system, and it easily led to dishonesty and abuse. John says to them: "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." In other words: don't be greedy, and don't abuse the system.

Some soldiers also came to John. These were not members of the Roman army, for there was no army stationed in Palestine at that time. They were probably Jews who had enlisted in the service of the Roman governor. These men asked John what should be different about their lives. John said: "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." It was not uncommon for these Roman-employed soldiers to use their power to intimidate, cheat, and defraud the common people. John's message to them: your needs are being taken care of. Don't be so greedy.

There are two things we should note in these interactions people had with John. First: in each case, people *sincerely wanted to know* what needed to be different about their lives for them to be acceptable to God. John's stern words about God's wrath and the judgment to come hit home. These people understood that if they wanted to wind up on the *right* side of God, they needed to be willing to make some changes to the way they were living their life. That kind of genuineness is somewhat rare. Far, *far* too many people persist in their own sinful behavior, unwilling or unable to make any changes. Far too many people never ask God, "What should I do?" But these people seemed to get it. Maybe they understood just how *serious* God is. This is the God who sent a flood to ravage the earth and who sent the Babylonian army to destroy the kingdom of Judah. God's standards have *always* been high. That is not going to change when Jesus comes, for as John says, "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." Jesus is going to execute the judgment of God. Alas for the trees that get chopped down; alas for the chaff that gets winnowed away. The judgment of God is coming. We had better take that seriously. We can choose to persist in our sins ... or we can choose to make some big changes.

The second thing to note about the interactions people had with John is that *they are incredibly personal*. John said *different things* to the crowds, to the tax collectors, and to the soldiers. Each group has its own particular set of vices and temptations. There are some very consistent *principles* across the whole of the Gospel message, but each group of people – *each individual person* – has to be able to ask God directly: what about *my* life most urgently needs to change? The answer God gives to you might be different than the answer God gives to your neighbor. Listen for God's word *to you*. If you come away thinking there's *nothing* about your life that needs to change, then you haven't listened long enough or hard enough, because there is something, or more than one thing, that each of us needs to work on. For every one of us, there is *something* we need to do to get our lives more in line with God's will. The questions we need to ask are: *what is it, for me?* And: *am I truly willing to do the hard work of change?*

Christmas is coming. More importantly, *Jesus* is coming. *What should YOU do to be ready?*

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