

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Advent 3-C (12 December 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

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Collect

Stir up your power, O Lord, and 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; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18, Canticle 9

1 Abraham for our ancestor

Today we get to experience the full force and fury of the preaching of John the Baptist. He starts out as “in-your-face” as he can possibly be. His prophetic mission is not about pulling punches or soft-selling his message. John has a word from the Lord, and it is going to be difficult for some people to hear. The fascinating thing about prophets, though, is how differently their words are perceived by different people. A word will, at the same time, be comfort and threat, encouragement and judgment. Each listener gets to decide how we are going to receive this word of prophecy.

John begins, “You brood of vipers!” He is not looking to win friends and influence people. He *is* demanding their attention, though. And what is his message? It is a simple one. “Your relationship with God is not a function of your background.” The axe is already at the root of the tree. It doesn’t matter what side of the tracks you were born on, how much education you received, what kind of job you work, or where you live now. It doesn’t matter if you come from “good people” and are prominent in town. It doesn’t matter if you have status, stature, and the respect of others. It doesn’t matter if you grew up in this church or if your family name is embedded in the stained glass windows. It doesn’t matter if you were a cradle Episcopalian, or if your grandpa was a Bishop. It doesn’t even matter if you are a direct, blood descendant of Abraham - or anyone else who was known to be in tight with God. In our reading today, even being God’s chosen people, the end result of centuries and generations of God’s special care and concern, is not enough.

John’s listeners understood this all well enough. They know what that axes feels like. They know what it means to be cut off from loved ones, from family, from respectability. They know what it is to lose a job or to be discriminated against. They know what it’s like when relationships break down and separations happen. Being cut off comes to every life, and loss is no respecter of persons.

2 What should we do?

What is the answer to being cut off, to separation, to loss? John is clear about that. John says, “Repentance means to treat others kindly and humanely.” Be sufficiently present to others to be able to meet them in their need. John didn’t say, go to church three times a week, give 10% of your income, and recite the psalter daily. What he did say was this: do the basic, human thing and share what you have extra that someone else needs.

This passage is striking, bizarre even, for the two special groups of people Luke reports on. Even the tax collectors. *Even* the tax collectors. It is hard to think of anyone as disreputable and despised in our society today as the tax collectors then. The tax collectors were traitors to their own fellow citizens, people who grew rich by snitching out their own neighbors and siphoning off their tax dollars for the use of the enemy, the occupiers. During the McCarthy era, these would be the communists! Maybe your television channel reserves special opprobrium for certain groups – those are the tax collectors! And what was John’s response to them? It wasn’t, “quit fraternizing with the enemy.” It wasn’t, “stop your traitorous work and leave your immoral job.” It wasn’t “do a work stoppage and demand concessions from Rome.” Instead he simply said, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed.” In other words, do your job, and don’t cheat or extort those from whom you are able to demand payment.

Then things get even stranger. Soldiers came to John. Soldiers. Who were these soldiers? Israel had no standing army of its own. Either these were Jewish extremists - terrorists hiding out in the desert and calling themselves soldiers - or they were Romans soldiers. Romans! What were Romans doing coming to hear John the Baptist? Were they Jewish boys who had totally given in to the enemy and now were willing occupiers of their own country on behalf of Caesar? Or were they gentile soldiers who heard something attractive in a man yelling out in the desert? What was John’s command to these persons whose ranks would soon behead John and later crucify Jesus? It was this: “Do not extort money from anyone, and be satisfied with your pay.”

John tells each of these groups, don’t just make vague excuses and unapologetic apologies. Repentance means action, practical ways of living that are just and hospitable to our neighbors.

3 One is coming

It may be that your pride is still smarting at the idea of being called a viper. But for the crowd there with John, people who had been told repeatedly that they were evil, worthless, and unloved by God, this was good news. John was offering them hope, change, and assurance that God would meet them in their very minimal steps toward repentance. In fact, John says, just you wait. You haven’t seen anything yet. If you think I’m preaching hot stuff, wait until you hear Jesus, the one coming after me. He is going to sweep up your virtues and your hurting hearts into the safety of his care. And he is going to burn away all the things that threaten, intimidate, and hurt you.

This coming fire, to the ears of one who is hurting, is Gospel, good news, which John proclaimed to the people. In the end, it wasn’t up to them to change the world. John *was* asking of them some basic human decency as preparation. Then, God’s breath and God’s power were coming to change the world completely. *That* is the good news for which the people were waiting.

Today we’re drawing on to the latter part of Advent. Are you ready for the coming of our Lord? If John’s words of prophecy sound scary, you may still have some preparatory work to do. But if you can relate to the crowds who gathered around John out in the desert; if you know hurt and heartache in your life, if you’re ready for a change that will be out of your control and beyond the power of anyone to stop, then John has good news for you. Someone is coming who is all that and more. We wait in expectation for Jesus to come, and for everything to be changed.

Amen.