

Sunday, December 12, 2021 – “The Message We All Want to Hear”
– Bible Study & Reflection on Luke 3:1-6

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Luke 3:7-18 (*Common English Bible*).

⁷ Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? ⁸ Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.”

¹⁰ The crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

¹¹ He answered, “Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same.”

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?”

¹³ He replied, “Collect no more than you are authorized to collect.”

¹⁴ Soldiers asked, “What about us? What should we do?”

He answered, “Don’t cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay.”

¹⁵ The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. ¹⁶ John replied to them all, “I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I’m not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.” ¹⁸ With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.

What is the message you want to hear as you get ready for Christmas? I’d sure like to hear a proposal for peace instead of international posturing. I long for a community that welcomes diversity and engages in open-minded, frank discussions without canceling out one another’s viewpoints. I want to hear a message that is for people of all faiths and people of no faith – a message that preaches inclusion and treating others the way that I want to be treated, a message of justice. I want a world that provides housing for the poor, a world where the homeless are not rummaging around on side streets and alleys, a world where all people have a decent winter coat, a world where children do not go to bed with an empty stomach. But then, maybe my expectations are too lofty.

What are your expectations as you get ready for Christmas? What message do you want to hear?

This Sunday, we are exposed to the tough, fiery preach of John the Baptist. John’s sermon makes Advent not only a season of expectation as we move toward the nativity, but also a prophetic season of truth and stirring demand for repentance.

John was a fierce preacher of the raw truth. John, after all, was a prophet, and prophets tell the truth. Advent is a season when we listen to the words of the prophets, words of inconvenient truths. And yet, John did more than simply tell the truth. John told the truth as

a stirring call for repentance. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means turning around from sinful ways and turning toward God. John preached not simply for agreement or assent but as a call for repentance.

Why would “multitudes,” great crowds, clamber out into the wilderness to hear John’s preaching? Usually, we can be counted on to avoid hearing the truth about ourselves. We do much to cover up, to avoid, to deceive and dissemble ourselves.

And yet, there is also within us an inclination, perhaps put there by the way God put us together, an inclination to grow, to change, and to be more of the sort of people God intends us to be. There’s no way to be better if no one loves God and us enough to tell us the truth.

That’s how John preached.

Advent is thus the season of honesty, the time when every year we must hear the preaching of John the Baptist. In his sermon, John actually call his own people and us, “You brood of vipers . . . you children of snakes,” telling us not to take comfort in the old securities (“And don’t start saying among yourselves that Abraham is your ancestor”). John spares no words in calling us to be honest and to live lives that reflect that honesty about our condition.

In a recent sermon workshop, one minister commented, “People come to church to get a pat on the head and to receive encouragement to think the best of themselves.” John the Baptist seems to disagree that people come to church listening for only what they want to hear. Or perhaps John believes that it may be possible to surprise us by telling us that which we didn’t know we wanted to hear? Perhaps, in our better moments, we long for honesty, for straightforward assessment of our situation that leads to lives better prepared for the advent of the Christ into our world.

An honest assessment leads to lives that are turned around, changed through visible actions. The crowds asked John, “What then should we do?” He answered, “Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same.”

For John, Preparer of the Way, honesty is only the beginning. In being truthful, John puts us on the road to being changed. John tells the truth, lets the truth cut where it will. Yet he does so with the conviction that our God is strong enough to change us. If John’s words sound harsh, they are spoken out of a conviction that the love of God overcomes our resistance, bringing us the new life for which we long.

Advent holds within it a promise not only of prophetically delivered truth, but also truth that changes us. And that is why we can be joyful and hear John’s message as good news.

Is that the message we all want to hear as we get ready for Christmas? I hope so!

This will be my last Pastor’s Blog entry for 2021.

Have A Blessed Christmas & A Happy & Healthy New Year!

Pastor Greg Rupright