

Sermon for December 16, 2018 – “What Do We Do Now?”

3rd Sunday of Advent, Year C – Texts: Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

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“What then should we do?” This is the question that the crowds ask John the Baptist in our gospel reading. Each of us could probably tell about a time in our life when that was the most important question on our minds. I don’t mean simply deciding what to do or figuring out what is on the to-do list for the day, I’m talking a “big picture” kind of question which is what we’re looking at today. The question, in the context of today’s gospel reading, is something of an existential one, a question that strikes at the very core of our being. These kinds of questions come to us in different ways. Sometimes we realize something about ourselves or our life; we recognize a truth and know we need to make a change. Or maybe we recognize a particular behavior or pattern of how we think, act, see, relate to others, ourselves, the world, or God. We do the same thing over and over and nothing seems to change. There’s no movement or growth and certainly no repentance. Inevitably, for most of us if we’re paying attention, there comes a time when we realize change is needed. Things don’t work out. Something happens. Someone says something. The tried and true ways become tired and trite. It may happen suddenly – or slowly over time. Either way, we realize we can’t go on like we have. We must not only **do** things differently, we must **be** different. Perhaps for the first time we acknowledge the reality of a problem. Or maybe we’ve lived with a deep sense of unhappiness or restlessness and we’re left wondering: “What then should we do?” Other times, whether or not we want them or are ready for them, life brings us changes. The loss of a loved one, a divorce, an illness, a shattered dream, betrayal of a friend, the last child that grows up and moves out all leave us asking “What then should we do?” Regardless of how it comes about that question brings us to a crossroads. It brings us to a place of discernment and decision and ultimately a place of repentance. We must begin looking for a new direction for our life.

That’s what happened to the people who heard John’s preaching. Something about his message, a message of change, preparation, and repentance, has taken root in them. It’s the Church’s Advent message that in the coming of Christ neither we – nor the world can continue on in the same old ways. That message was enough to draw the crowds out to John, and it’s John’s message to us today. The crowds have heard a word in the wilderness of their life. It’s a prophetic word, a word of deep insight by which they recognize that all is not well in their life and world. It’s also a word of hope and rejoicing, a word of God (and from God) that says all can (and will) be well. It’s a word that joins the wilderness and paradise and makes them two sides of the same reality.

Today’s gospel reading is the continuation of last week’s reading. John the Baptist is in the wilderness proclaiming repentance, echoing the Prophet Isaiah’s words, “**Prepare the way of the Lord...**” and reminding us that all flesh shall see the salvation of the Lord. If last week’s gospel was a call to repentance, then today’s gospel demands action. Repentance requires action. It must become for us a **lived** reality. The Word of God always seeks a response from us. And that’s exactly what John the Baptist demands of those who come to him. His words have left them at the crossroads of repentance with choices to make. They’ve heard a new truth in John’s preaching. They’ve recognized a need to change and they want to know what to do.

It's a legitimate question. It's legitimate even when we recognize that the need and desire to turn our life in a new direction is a pretty big task. It's legitimate when that whole process can seem so big, so overwhelming that it seems impossible. John the Baptist knows this because John also knows that real change, genuine transformation, does not begin with the world around us but the world within us.

One of the things that often makes change difficult is our propensity for self-justification. This happens in lots of different ways. We blame others. We list how hard we've worked and what we believe we deserve. We claim place and position by virtue of our length of membership or our giving of time and money. We deny our need for others. We refuse to accept responsibility for ourselves. We play the victim. We choose to live with blinders on. John understands this about us. He expresses his understanding directly and bluntly: "You brood of vipers, you sons of snakes What are you doing here? Don't tell me who you are. I don't care who your family is. Show me who you are. Show me your repentance." John's challenged them to "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." John is saying that if we're going to be in, we need to be in all the way. He has no patience for self-justification. He won't settle for simply good behavior. There must be congruence between who we are and what we do. Repentance, changing the direction of our lives means that inner change, a change in our way of being must be manifested by corresponding behaviors. Likewise, our words and actions must point to, and arise, from a different way of being.

"What then should we do?" The crowds, the tax collectors, the soldiers all ask the same question. I suspect many of us have asked that question as well. John's answer is simple and practical. Go do the right thing. Share with those in need. Do not take advantage of or defraud others. Don't manipulate, use, or coerce others. His answers sound reasonable. They make sense. What's more, they seem do-able. Underneath them, however, lie the deeper issue and the real change that must take place. The reason we can deny or be indifferent to the needs of others, the reason we can lie to or take advantage of another, the reason we can use, manipulate, harm or even **kill** someone is because we see them as something other, something less than our selves...less than human. We see them as objects to be used or overcome not as persons. John is demanding behavior that arises from and grounded in a new way of being, one that sees the other as a person, a person with needs, hopes, fears, dreams, with life as real and as valid as our own. That is the ultimate act of repentance, to see others as persons, as holy, as created and loved by the same God who created and loves us. It means we must turn away from doing or being anything that dehumanizes another or us. This changes everything. It changes how we see the world and how we relate to others. It's what Jesus is talking about when He says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." It is as author and priest Richard Rohr writes, "...a gospel of shared life." One life shared with other persons and with God.

There's a story a pastor tells of a time many years ago when a close friend and mentor pointed out some hard truths about his (the pastor's) life. The pastor remembers asking him, "So what should I do now?" His mentor looked at him and simply said, "Go do the next right thing." That wasn't the answer that he was looking for. As the discussion continued the pastor realized his friend wasn't telling him to go fix his life all at once. He realized that a quick fix didn't actually exist. He was only asking the pastor to take the first step in a new direction. "What should I do after that?" the pastor asked. The mentor's answer was the same.

“Go do the next right thing, and after that go do the next right thing.” This set the pastor on a path of repentance. These small and simple steps, though not necessarily **easy** steps, would become life changing behavior. That’s exactly what John the Baptist tells those who ask him “What should we do?” He tells the crowd to share their food with those who are hungry and have none. If they have two coats, they are to give one to someone who has no coat. It is not hard to figure out. It is the next right thing to do. To the tax collectors he says act fairly, be honest in your dealings with other people, do not take more than owed you. It’s the next right thing to do. And he tells the soldiers not to abuse their power, to not manipulate others, and to not create more victims. Why? Well, mainly because it’s the next right thing to do.

Do you notice what’s happening here? John didn’t tell any of them to go and **be** something different. Instead he called them to be who they **are** but in a different way. He didn’t tell the tax collectors to go find an honest living, he asked them to be honest tax collectors. He didn’t tell the soldiers to stop being soldiers, but to be soldiers who respected others and understood the danger of power. He called the crowds to remember that their life is bound up in their neighbor’s life and there is no room for indifference, complacency, or miserly giving. This shared life is why the events of the past year the mass shooting at Fifth Third Bank, the one at the synagogue in Pittsburgh, the tragic death of Kyle Plush, the wildfires in California, hurricanes Florence and Michael – to name just a few - all of these and more have broken our hearts and left us with confusion, sorrow, fear, and questions. In some way the lack of or failure to recognize our shared life is why such events can happen. Those events tell us once again that something has to change. They echo with John’s words. We cannot go on like this. Every moment of every day we make **choices**. We choose, rightly or wrongly, our way of being. We choose how we’ll speak – and how we’ll act. Amidst the many voices that will offer analysis and answers, explanations and opinions of these events, we must continue to hear the voice of John the Baptist insofar as he prepares us for the coming of Christ. We must “bear fruits worthy of repentance.” In other words, we must be willing to change, be willing to do things that show the world that we’re ready, willing – and to some extent, able – to welcome the kingdom that is coming that – indeed – is already here. And here – brothers and sisters – is the thing. Repentance is not just about **us**. It’s connected to and happens in relationship with God and our neighbor. It always restores, enhances, and gives life. It’s not about escaping the circumstances of our life but about **engaging** those circumstances in a new and different way. God’s way. Repentance opens us to see ourselves and each other as we really are in God. It fills us with the joyful expectation of the one who is more powerful than any of us, the Christ, the Messiah. Repentance opens our minds, softens our hearts, and turns our life in a Godward direction. It’s how we participate in and cooperate with God’s act of bringing us home and restoring our fortunes. It’s how we recover our original and ancient beauty, how we become filled with expectation, hope, peace and joy. At its deepest level repentance makes us more human. And becoming more human is how we prepare the way of the Lord. That’s our Advent work. It’s important work. Why? Well, it ain’t because Santa Claus is coming to town but because the God who comes is coming to humanity.

So, what's left for us the remaining days of Advent is to answer the question what's the next right thing for our lives? When we identify that we'll have discovered a place of repentance, a place of expectation and anticipation, a place of hope and peace, a place of glad tidings, a place of great joy.

It's Advent, go and do the next right thing!

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen and amen.