

Third Sunday in Advent (c)
Zephaniah 3:14-20 Philippians 4:4-7 Luke 3:7-18
Saint John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
December 12, 2021 (Traditional)

We read in scripture that big crowds of people trekked out into the wasteland to see John the Baptist. You might wonder...why? John was kind of insulting. He rained fire and brimstone down on their heads. But I think they found his honesty refreshing. They knew he wasn't trying to manipulate them. The pharisees came out and he called them a brood of vipers. You couldn't put on any false airs with John. Everyone who listened to him knew they were in the same boat.

John exposed peoples' sin and failings. And he wasn't afraid to tell people what they could do to mend their ways. When someone tells you what you can do to live a better life—obviously there's a judgment inherent in that. But in my experience, I've found that when I can get around that humiliation, I can see that that person—if I trust that they love me—I know they are actually giving me power. By telling me what I need to do, they are also telling me *I can do it*. And that's empowering.

So with all his fire and brimstone, John gave power to people, and he was really a healer. He challenges us: why are we hiding, why are we running away from what we should be doing right now? Don't put it off. God's time is always now. Don't wait to take care of those loose ends in your life. Don't wait for the judge to come. The judge is already with us. Our lives are demanded of us, not when the day ends but in the middle of the day.

People went out to hear John because they knew they were broken. Every sinner in the world—all of us—it's like we've got something in our lives that's killing us. Sometimes it's a hidden thing, and that's where the dying becomes evil. John, by calling us to get those hidden things out, enables us to die well. To die honestly, to die to ourselves and to live to God. It's the old wisdom: You need to get your problems out on the table if you are going to do something about them. Otherwise your problems master you. John's voice is still ringing in our ears: "Don't waste your time convincing God and people that you're complete, self-sufficient, shiny....Repent!"

Another thing you notice about John...it really doesn't look like he he's telling the crowd anything they don't already know. What makes John amazing is not any special insight he has into people's problems. It's that he says it. He's telling people now's the time to repent, now's the time to change your ways, because the Messiah has come. The final judge is now in our midst. The tax-collectors and soldiers in the gospel knew they were using their position and their power to rip people off. It's just that now, John is calling them on it. Likewise, we know there are phone calls we should be making today. There are thank-yous and apologies we should have made long ago. We have bad habits and behaviors which we should be fighting against, but we're dragging our feet about them, we're holding onto them. We see destructive things happening right in front of us, but we let the destruction happen. The answers to most of our problems are right there in front of us. We know it...John just points it out.

So why do we delay to do these things we know full well we should be doing? Well, it comes right out of our broken relationship with God. God has an absolute claim over our lives and we are dependent upon him. But sin makes us deny his claim on us. We rebel against anything that makes us look like we're not the masters of our own lives. And that's what makes repentance hard. Because if you are going to change, if you are going to repent, the first step is to admit you're not the final authority over your own life.

So John the Baptist gets everything out in the open. He doesn't do it so we can wallow in guilt. He does it because the truth is, in front of God, every last little sin has to be dealt with. For just a minute, let's look at Jesus as Holy Scripture presents him in today's gospel lesson. You notice, John is *warning* the people about Jesus.

He is pointing to Jesus as the final judge...God's last word. And John the baptist is warning us, that in Jesus all accounts are going to be settled once and for all. We might not normally think of Jesus in those terms, but he is the final judge *who has come*. Every selfish act, and every irresponsible and hurtful remark, all the gossip and pettiness that is part of our lives today. John is warning us: we don't want to be standing there in front of the holy God with all this mess still a part of us. And John knew: the judge had come to settle the account. Because every neglected responsibility has to be paid for. Every broken relationship has to be paid for. John points to Jesus and says "he is the end of the line. I can yell at you and tell you everything you need to do to prepare for him. But when he comes there's nothing more you can do. Every hidden ugly thing in your life will be exposed in Jesus, and on that day you won't be able to do anything about it. Because Jesus is coming not to help us get ourselves out of anything. Jesus is coming to deal with our sin once and for all. John was absolutely right. Jesus didn't—and he doesn't—help us get ourselves out of anything. He just dealt with our sin in a way that surprised everyone, including John!

We hear John's voice before what's usually the most warm and comforting season of the Church year...Christmas. And it's a good thing. Do we want a God who gives us warm fuzzies while we're ruining our lives and destroying his creation? No. We need a God who puts his axe to the root of the tree. Who tells us clearly the balance on our account with him, and what the payment needs to be.

We have a Lord who has tallied the balance on our account. He has made it clear that the debt is too big for us to pay. In fact, if we live trying to pay our debt to God off, all those spiritual nickels and dimes we're throwing at him might as well be counted against us. Because God has made it very clear--we live only by grace, or we don't live at all. We simply have to come to terms with this hard fact that we have nothing to offer when it comes to our relationship with God. All we can do is sit with an empty account and listen to him. And here's what he tells us: All the debt that we owe: he has made it his. He has taken every little mistake, every unkind word, every lie, every hateful act--he has taken it all to the cross and nailed it there, where it all dies. He pays the price for all of it. And in return he fills our empty accounts with a resurrection--a completely new life to live. He tells us the debt's been paid. He assures us the future belongs to us, and he gives

us a downpayment on that future: his Spirit.

Today we hear John the Baptist's call to repentance. And we can hear his call in two different ways. We can try to follow his call, thinking that by following him we're paying off some of our debt to God. Or we can follow his call because we're going to joyfully, gratefully, freely use God's downpayment on a future which belongs to us no matter what. The first way makes us feel like we have some kind of control over God—which is a joke. The second way is humbling because we know we don't deserve what we've been given in the first place. It's humbling, but it is the way of joy and freedom. Because it's a life based not on our goodness, but on the goodness of our Savior.

We Christians start each day not with a bunch of debt, but with a promise. And what that means for daily life is simple: Listen to John the Baptist. Today is the day to make those phone calls we need to make. Today is the day to say those necessary thank yous and make those necessary apologies. Today is the day to forgive and make God's peace not just an idea but a reality in your life. Today is the day to lose your pride as necessary. Go ahead and lose it all. The judge has come. The Lamb of God. The Savior. He's given us a life we can't lose.