

ADVENT 3C

December 13, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Zephaniah 3:14-20 Isaiah 12:2-6 Philippians 4:4-7 ***Luke 3:7-18***

Last week we learned about Luke's introduction to John the Baptist. We heard that he was a prophet, much like the prophets of old. And we heard that his being in the wilderness was very important to helping the people understand that he was a very important prophet.

But I've always wondered why John the Baptist preached in the desert? That hasn't made much sense to me. For instance, if we look at the ministries of the Apostle Paul or St. Peter, they always went straight to the heart of the town, where the most people gathered, to speak to the people. Going into large population centers was the most effective way to spread the good news to the most people.

But in today's text, we find John the Baptist out in the wilderness. And what are his first words to this group of people who came to him to be baptized? "You brood of vipers!"

If John made a habit of such greeting, no wonder he was preaching in the desert. He was probably run out of town.

Yet our Gospel reading for today ends with the words, "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." Excuse me? "Good news"? Where's the good news in this text?

John starts by calling the people *snakes*, and then tells them that their covenanted relationship with God through Abraham is no guarantee that they'll be saved. He warns them that if they don't bear the fruits of repentance – if their lives don't change to demonstrate that they've changed – they'll be cut down and thrown into the fire. Then later, John tells the people that they'll be like wheat. When the harvest time comes, Jesus will be the winnowing fork that throws the wheat up into the air, separating the good, useable portions – the wheat – from the chaff – the useless husk of the wheat kernel. “And woe be unto you,” he says, “if you're found to be the chaff – you'll be burnt with unquenchable fire.” This is good news only if you're found to be the wheat.

The good news is that those who made the journey out into the wilderness to receive John's baptism of repentance were already repentant. They recognized that they had sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God. Perhaps that's why these people were willing to hang around and hear the rest of what John had to say, even after his less-than-cordial greeting. It must have taken a sincere knowledge of how sinful they were for these people to stay and hear John. It would have been far easier to say, “Hey, I acknowledged I was sorry when I came out here. But I don't have to hang around and hear you verbally abuse me.”

So, in their repentance, the people ask, “How can we demonstrate that we’re changed? What are these ‘fruits of repentance’ you’re looking for?” And John lays it out for them in three easy steps: (1) Take care of those less fortunate than you; (2) Be fair in your dealings with others; and, (3) Be satisfied with your station in life, whatever that might be.

This is the same message that Amos, Zephaniah, Isaiah, Micah, and many of the Old Testament prophets delivered: If you truly seek to do the Lord’s will, you’ll act with justice toward all people. John’s message of justice was not all that different than the message of the prophets of old, the prophets of the Old Testament.

But John the Baptist’s message was not merely one of justice. John’s specific task was to prepare the people for Jesus’ coming. John was specifically sent to call the people to repentance, to prepare their hearts for the one who teaches us all the true meaning of love and justice, Jesus Christ.

John’s message is not any different than the message of today’s prophets. They preach the Law, so that we will know where we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But they also preach Gospel, so that we hear God’s word of forgiveness and love.

Bearing fruit – doing good things and behaving fairly toward others – is an *outcome* of faithful living. It’s the result of having heard and believed in the Gospel, the good news. It’s the result of having a transformed heart, a heart which is repentant and turns toward God. As Martin Luther and the early Reformers put it, good works that are the result of faith are those that are pleasing to God.



In the midst of our holiday season, it seems that everywhere we turn people are engaged in doing good works, in taking care of those less fortunate. The spirit of giving abounds.

In our consumer-driven society, though, it seems oddly counter-cultural for people to engage in so much giving at this time of year. After all, we’re the society that created the saying, “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” Power is often gauged by how much a person possesses, and not how much he or she gives.

Several years ago a study came out that may just shed some light on why it is that even people who don’t believe in Jesus engage in so much giving this time of year. Two researchers surveyed nearly 1,300 people and asked what brought them more happiness: obtaining more possessions, or having experiences. They found overwhelmingly that people are more fulfilled in their experiences than in their purchases.¹

I certainly find this to be true when I think back on all my past Christmases. I remember anxiously waiting for my grandparents to arrive. I remember the family gathered around the table at Christmas dinner, being led in prayer by my grandfather. I remember sitting in a small, quiet candlelit church on Christmas Eve. I remember my mother and I adopting a soldier for Christmas dinner. I remember hosting a dinner for the soldiers under John Mark's command, who couldn't get home for Christmas. What made each of those Christmases memorable was spending special time with the people in my life.

I'm sure this study on the personal satisfaction found in experiences versus in consuming was no revelation to the New York advertising company that came up with MasterCard's "Priceless" campaign. Do you know the one I'm talking about? The ad campaign premiered during the 1997 World Series, with a spot that went something like this: A father and son are going to a baseball game. We hear the announcer say, "Two tickets for a major league baseball game: \$28. Two hot dogs, peanuts, and drinks: \$20. Baseball hat and glove: \$40. Real conversation with 11-year-old son: Priceless. There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's MasterCard."

This ad campaign, which has had a variety of permutations in its twelve-year run, has been one of the most successful ad campaigns in history. Its success, in large part, is in its ability to tap into a large, shared body of experience that nearly everyone cherishes: special time spent with family and friends. But I think the nerve that it touches within all of us goes even deeper than that. It's the giving of oneself, and receiving of another, that's priceless.

This is the heart of the good news that John was sent to proclaim: that God is sending the most precious gift in the world to us. It's a gift without cost, because it's priceless. Jesus is someone who will give freely of his whole self so that we might live. All that is asked of us is to, in faith, receive this gift.

And once we've received this gift, our lives will never be the same. We'll be changed people, new creations. Because of this gift, we won't be able *but* to bear the fruits of that transformed life. Love for our neighbors, a sense of justice, and a generous heart will burst forth. These are the fruits of the gift of Jesus Christ in our lives.

And so, as we prepare to share priceless moments with our family and friends during this holiday season, I ask you to reflect upon the priceless gift that has been given to us in Jesus Christ. I know it's hard during the hustle and bustle of this season to find even a few minutes of peace and quiet. But here's one thing you might try: After you've brought all your best combat driving techniques to bear in the mall or store parking lot, and you've finally found a parking place, *stop*. Turn off the engine, and *be still*. Spend just a few minutes to quietly sit in your car, to prepare your heart for that most wonderful of gifts. Pray and reflect on the gift you've been given in Jesus Christ. Think about the one who came not as a conquering king, with palaces, horses, and soldiers, but as the most powerless of all – a tiny baby. It is the coming of this tiny baby which we so anxiously await, for it is in the gift of this powerless one that we receive all that really matters.

Amen.

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¹Leaf Van Boven and Thomas Gilovich, "To Do or to Have? That Is the Question" in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 85, No. 6 (December 2003), 1193-1202.