

“What then should we do?”

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12/12/2021 - Advent 3

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Luke 3:7-18

This week we continue our Advent journey picking up in Luke’s gospel exactly where we left off last week with John the Baptist. We heard an introduction to John, whom Luke identifies as the prophetic “voice crying out in the wilderness” to prepare the way for the messiah, for one who will bring both the forgiveness of sins and an overturning of societal norms.

After that introduction we get to our passage today when we hear John’s message in words given to him by the writer. Before we get to that, though, let’s look at the setting. John is out somewhere in the wilderness - we are given no landmarks or direction about where he is, and yet a crowd has found him there. In general, people don’t just find themselves out in the wilderness going about their daily business, do they? No, these people had heard about John somehow, despite John being out in the wilderness, far away from the centers of power and the political and religious leaders. In the Bible, when people go into the wilderness, they tend to be stripped of the ability to provide for themselves and instead meet God’s provision. I think of the ancient Israelites in Exodus wandering through the wilderness, when God fed them manna and quail from the sky, brought water from rock, and led them as a pillar of fire at night and cloud by day. The writer of Luke gave us a clue here, if we’re paying attention.

John and the crowd have an exchange. John’s first words are stark; in true prophetic form he is holding nothing back. Calling the crowd a “brood of vipers,” he assures them that no one will be able to rely on their privilege, their family history, or their social position when the Messiah comes. Relying on earthly power is not only not going to be an advantage, it will be a liability. Not only will it be like a tree that doesn’t bear good fruit, it will be like a tree that might as well be firewood.

These people who came to John in the wilderness were seeking something badly enough that they left their daily responsibilities to go find a prophet in the wilderness. They ask John, “What then should we do?” A sign that they really are seeking something and think that John’s message might lead them to it.

I like that the people ask this question so directly of John. I imagine that for these people to come meet John in the wilderness, they were perhaps dissatisfied with the messages, both explicit and implicit coming from Roman imperial culture at the time. I am guessing that they felt rather powerless in the face of such a growing empire, and rather insignificant within it. Maybe they were sick of hearing promises about justice to come, decisions on the way, and having to wait for their fulfillment. Maybe even those promises weren’t coming anymore.

In the passage from Zephaniah, the people to whom the prophet addresses were sick of ongoing suffering and promises left unfulfilled. There had been a series of kings about whose bad leadership and corruption the prophets left volumes. The kings had not acted well in their role as crucial mediators in the

relationship between God and the people, and the prophets drew a direct line to current suffering as a result. Most of the rest of the book of Zephaniah is grim: it talks about judgment and suffering. Then, without warning, our passage from today comes in and says that amid all of this suffering and worry, there is reason to rejoice. The writer tells the people to sing, shout, rejoice, exult! They are not to worry because God is already in their midst, already with them in their suffering. There is a festival to come; what you are experiencing now will not last. The message is that God is coming near, and is already with the people more than they, than we often realize. The passage starts out in the voice of the prophet, then abruptly shifts in the middle to the voice of God. The passage goes from “The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing¹⁸ as on a day of festival.” Then in first person, “I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.²⁰ At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you.”

The people addressed in Zephaniah lived hundreds of years before those who met John in the wilderness but I imagine they were likely in similar places of disillusion and worry. Overlapping crises, a need for constant adaptation, dealing with preventable suffering while watching those around us suffer and trying to help the best we can, feeling pressure to get back to a normal when we don't know what normal means anymore. Does that sound or feel familiar? Yes, all of that is true and at the same time, God comes near.

Let's return to John and the crowd in the wilderness. John's message boils down to this: make it your business to find out who is in need and give to them out of your own abundance. When you have enough, give the extra to someone who needs it. The question from the crowd is “What then should **we** do?” John's message and eventually Jesus's message of Good News is not just for individuals, but for all of us together. In order to care for one another and for our neighbors, we first have to know them and know what they need.

Times of suffering and disillusionment like what the crowd was likely feeling, like what we have perhaps been feeling, will come. Our broader cultural messages too often are individualistic and insulated. We are told to take care of ourselves and our family and shamed when systems are set against those of us who are not white, male, born citizens, able-bodied, straight, who have access to generational wealth. Far too often the message is to keep your head down, take care of your own, don't accept help. This is intended to separate us from one another and too often, it succeeds. John's message and Jesus' message flip that messaging and that shame on its head. John's message of repentance was to know one another, take care of one another, and accept care when you need it. When systems seek to separate us and pressure us to look only to ourselves, instead look outward.

We have two scripture passages this morning speaking of a new Way to come that is already even starting. Did that news take away the suffering, answer all of the questions, or take away all of the confusion? I really doubt that it did. Today, on Gaudete Sunday, I remind you that joy is not primarily a feeling, but a spiritual practice. Joy can exist along with the full range of human emotion, from huge moments of happiness when joy is not hard to find to the most difficult, grief-stricken, tragedy-laden times we can imagine. Practicing joy means noticing the constants and the small moments that are continually

happening, the small moments when we feel God's presence and are reminded that God is still working in and through us. To the crowd's question to John, "What then should we do," practicing joy is most possible when we are in community. We are each given our own life experiences and lenses through which we notice joy, of course, but think about the moment in worship when we share joys with one another. Don't you sometimes feel lifted when someone shares a joy and you can hear their joy? Sharing joys is a way of keeping one another updated on our lives but it is its own spiritual practice because joy is revolutionary. Joy tells the truth that God was with us in the past, God is with us in whatever we are experiencing now, and God will continue to be with us and all of creation in the future. John preached to the crowd about a new Way to come through a messiah and his central message was to prepare, together, to shift your entire focus and way of being because you have not seen everything God is doing yet. Thanks be to God, amen.