



LESSONS

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20
ISAIAH 12:2-6 (6)
PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7
ST. LUKE 3:7-18

PRAYER OF THE DAY

STIR UP THE WILLS OF
YOUR FAITHFUL PEOPLE,
LORD GOD, AND OPEN
OUR EARS TO
THE PREACHING OF
JOHN, THAT, REJOICING
IN YOUR SALVATION, WE
MAY BRING FORTH THE
FRUITS OF REPENTANCE;
THROUGH JESUS CHRIST,
OUR SAVIOR AND LORD,
WHO LIVES AND REIGNS
WITH YOU AND THE
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,
NOW AND FOREVER.
AMEN.

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Liturgical Day: The Wednesday before the Third Sunday of Advent

Date: December 9, 2009

Sermon Title: He Proclaimed the Good News

What counts for good news in your life? "The tests all came back negative." "The Nuggets won in overtime." "All six numbers match." "It's covered by warrantee." "The airplane has landed safely."

We all know what it is like to receive good news, don't we? Especially if it is something that has left us waiting for some time. Whether it has to do with SATs, or loan applications, or blood tests – every additional day we have to wait makes it a bit more intense. And when the news finally comes, especially if it is good news, it feels as though the weight of the world has been taken off of our shoulders.

John, the Baptizer, is preaching in the wilderness. St. Luke ends his description of those days with this sentence: "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." He proclaimed the good news to the people. Ah, great – good news. Just what the people were hoping to hear. And you and I, knowing a bit (as we do) about God's grace, might be able to guess without even looking at the text what it was that he said. "God loves you." "Your sins are forgiven." "Today you will be with me in paradise." Good news, right? The kind of good news we've come to expect from the church and from the Gospel. The kind of good news that lifts our spirits and empowers our faithfulness.

But no, that's not what Luke reports when he tells us of John's ministry. Here, instead, is the good news, John the Baptizer style:

- You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
- Bear fruits worthy of repentance.
- Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'
- Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.
- Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.
- Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation,
- ...be satisfied with your wages.

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Does it sound like good news to you? Not to me. It sounds like the kind of harsh and unforgiving law-



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God's work. Our hands.

based message that runs counter to everything we know about the Christian faith. It sounds like a message that brings death instead of life. It sounds like a message that could whittle our congregation down to about the number of souls who are gathered here at this early morning hour.

If the message was left at that, there wouldn't be much good news to proclaim. If all the Gospel had to offer us was the demand that we live good lives, there wouldn't be much that was good about it. Oh sure, sharing coats and food and being kind to one another would make a great difference in the world. But Israel had lived with that kind of a faith for years, and by the time of John the Baptist, they had been waiting a long time for more. They had been waiting for better news than that. They had been waiting for God's Messiah, who would free them from the bondage to sin, and the consequences of living in a broken world. A world where people with two coats often don't share with those who have none. A world where people with food consume most of it themselves and throw the rest away. A world where elected officials and armed combatants take advantage of their positions at the expense of others. Israel knew how far short humans tend to fall from these lofty ideals that John declares. And they had been waiting a long time for God's promise of something better – something new.

If all John had to say was that we need to hitch up our britches, and do a better job of being God's people, it would be old news. Stale news. Even bad news. But there's more. There's more to the good news that St. Luke reports. There is more to the preaching that people received from John, the Baptizer. This week's text concludes: "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

John here announces what the people were longing to hear. God will indeed send someone to make a difference. He, like John, will take a hard and often painful look at people's hearts. He, like John, will work to cut away what was damaged and unhealthy... a surgical procedure that can be both frightening and painful.

But the good news is that he will also love them enough to die for them. And in his rising, he will proclaim the power of God to heal them, to renew them, and to give them life. Life in which the coat shared, the meal provided, the kindness offered are signs of a new reality he is creating in their midst.

This is the good news proclaimed by John – proclaimed to the people of his day, and to us as well. It is hard news: after all he comes with his winnowing fork in his hand, and there is quite an accumulation of chaff mixed in with the wheat. But it is joyful news: in that this one comes with a loving and gracious and transforming power that makes all the difference in the world.

So let's be stirred by his Word. And let's feast on his presence, that he might cleanse us and renew us and transform us into the people God has called us to be.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor

Gospel Lesson; English Text: ⁱ

^{3:7} John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹ In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{3:7} Ἐλεγεν οὖν τοῖς ἐκπορευομένοις χλοῖς βαπτισθῆναι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ· γεννήματα ἐχιδνῶν, τίς ὑπέδειξεν ὑμῖν φυγεῖν ἀπὸ τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς; ⁸ ποιήσατε οὖν καρποὺς ἀξίους τῆς μετανοίας καὶ μὴ ρξησθε λέγειν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς· πατέρα χομεν τὸν Ἀβραάμ. λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν τι δύναται ὁ θεὸς ἐκ τῶν λίθων τούτων ἐγεῖραι τέκνα τῷ Ἀβραάμ. ⁹ ἤδη δὲ καὶ ἡ ἀξίνη πρὸς τὴν ῥίζαν τῶν δένδρων κείται· πᾶν οὖν δένδρον μὴ ποιῶν καρπὸν καλὸν ἐκκόπτεται καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται. ¹⁰ Καὶ ἐπηρώτων αὐτὸν οἱ χλοὶ λέγοντες· τί οὖν ποιήσωμεν; ¹¹ ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς· ὁ χων δύο χιτῶνας μεταδότω τῷ μὴ χοντι, καὶ ὁ χων βρώματα ὁμοίως ποιείτω. ¹² ἦλθον δὲ καὶ τελῶναι βαπτισθῆναι καὶ εἶπαν πρὸς αὐτὸν· διδάσκαλε, τί ποιήσωμεν; ¹³ ὁ δὲ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς· μηδὲν πλέον παρὰ τὸ διατεταγμένον ὑμῖν πράσσετε. ¹⁴ ἐπηρώτων δὲ αὐτὸν καὶ στρατευόμενοι λέγοντες· τί ποιήσωμεν καὶ ἡμεῖς; καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· μηδένα διασεισητε μηδὲ συκοφαντήσητε καὶ ἀρκείσθε τοῖς ὄψωνίοις ὑμῶν.

¹⁵ Προσδοκῶντος δὲ τοῦ λαοῦ καὶ διαλογιζομένων πάντων ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν περὶ τοῦ Ἰωάννου, μήποτε αὐτὸς εἴη ὁ χριστός, ¹⁶ ἀπεκρίνατο λέγων πᾶσιν ὁ Ἰωάννης· ἐγὼ μὲν ὕδατι βαπτίζω ὑμᾶς· ἔρχεται δὲ ὁ ἰσχυρότερος μου, οὗ οὐκ εἰμι ἰκανὸς λῦσαι τὸν ἱμάντα τῶν ὑποδημάτων αὐτοῦ· αὐτὸς ὑμᾶς βαπτίσει ἐν πνεύματι ἀγίῳ καὶ πυρὶ. ¹⁷ οὗ τὸ πτύον ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ διακαθάρει τὴν λωνα αὐτοῦ καὶ συναγαγεῖν τὸν σίτον εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην αὐτοῦ, τὸ δὲ χυρον κατακαύσει πυρὶ ἀσβέστῳ. ¹⁸ Πολλὰ μὲν οὖν καὶ τερα παρακαλῶν εὐηγγελίζετο τὸν λαόν. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Lectionary.aspx>

ⁱⁱ St. Luke 3:7-18, *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Luke 3:7-18, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).