

Sermon: Luke 3:7-18 (Advent 3C)
Christ Church Riverdale, 13 December 2009
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Luke 3:7-18 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.

“So with many other exhortations,[John] proclaimed the good news to the people.” Good news?! At a time when a lot of us are thinking about how there are less than two weeks before Christmas, John the Baptist sounds worse than Scrooge and the Grinch put together! “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? . . .” Now remember, these are not passersby on their way into the red light district, these are people who came all the way out into the wilderness to be baptized by John. “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees;” John shouts, “every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Holding the ax to measure the blow; you’ve got just enough time as it takes to swing the axe back and make the first chop to change big time! Why isn’t John pulling any punches? He’s expecting the Day of the Lord, the day of judgment when God sorts everything out and brings justice into an unjust world.

Jews in his day are in a difficult situation; their nation isn’t powerful enough to stand on its own and has been dominated by empire after empire--right now it’s the Roman Empire--great at getting and holding onto power, but not so good at respecting God and humanity. How are Jews to live in this situation, in the midst of a corrupt world, dominated by a foreign power? Different Jews lived in different ways. The Saducees were the establishment, and managed to adapt to whomever was in power, whether it was the Greeks or now the Romans. They practiced Judaism in a way that allowed them to be thoroughly modern and cosmopolitan in their everyday lives. Pharisees, on the other hand, didn’t want to accommodate, and worked to take the holiness of worship in the Temple and apply it to all of life in the world. Even though Pharisees get a lot of

criticism from Jesus there's no reason to believe that those criticisms were intended to apply to all Pharisees. The Essenes were a group who responded to the corruption of the world by withdrawing from it, leading their lives in a semi-monastic type of setting. This is the group associated with the Dead Sea scrolls, and it's quite probable that John himself was an Essene. Zealots didn't want to accommodate the Romans, or to withdraw; they wanted to overthrow Roman domination with force so that they could live in a Jewish nation powerful once again.

Different Jews lived in different ways but none of their responses to the corruption of the world was completely satisfactory. Nor has finding a way to cope been a problem just within Judaism. In later centuries, you can see all four of these tendencies within the church, and you can see them in the here and now. It may be that some people from all four groups—Saducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and Zealots—come out to hear John and to receive his baptism, come out acknowledging that their ways of dealing with the world somehow fall short. They hang in there with John during the “grinchy” stuff about vipers and trees being chopped down and burned, so that they can ask John a question—the question that turns John from Scrooge into teacher.

“What then should we do?” not, “Who do you think you are calling us names like that,” or “Things aren't all that bad, really,” but, “What then should we do?” John is very simple and very straightforward. Share what you have, be it food or clothing. Tax collectors, don't overcharge the taxpayers even though everybody else is doing it. Soldiers, don't extort money through intimidation even though you can. John doesn't say, “In order to prepare for the one who is to come, you need to sign up with the Saducees or the Pharisees or the Essenes, or the Zealots.” In fact, what he says doesn't fit quite with what any of the groups says. He's not telling people simply to accommodate; he's telling them to focus on ethics, not worship; he's talking about life in the world, not withdrawn from it; and to the very enforcers of Roman domination—tax collectors and soldiers—he doesn't say to quit, but to do their work honestly.

In a way we want the answer to be harder than that, or more complicated, or maybe more spectacular. In a way it'd be attractive to get let off the hook and told to accommodate, or told to observe certain ritual practices, or that we have to withdraw from the world, or that we need to be part of a great revolution. In a way it'd be more attractive, and more dramatic, and it might help us think of some kind of excuses. But John's words on how to prepare for Christ aren't necessarily attractive or dramatic, but practical—having to do with practice, with everyday life. In the same way, preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ is practical; it deals with our everyday practices of life, with things as simple as sharing and honesty.

It's been said that there are two ways of conforming our lives to God's call. Usually we think of starting by changing our beliefs, and then changing our actions to match those beliefs. The other, less well-known way of conforming our lives to God's call is the way John the Baptist is talking about. It's the way of changing our actions first, and letting our actions then transform our beliefs. Preparing for Christ can and does involve believing our way into living ethically. But John reminds the people, and us, that preparing for Christ also involves living our way into believing.