

Message  
12/13/09  
John Again?

Text: Luke 3:7-18

"Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your life that must change, not your skin. And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father.' Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire."<sup>1</sup>

The Message

How's that for an opening to a sermon just before Christmas? Good opening for a sermon anytime? I doubt that if I preached a sermon like that I'd be your pastor very long.

Well here we are twelve days before Christmas on the Sunday where the Advent theme is joy and we're stuck with John the Baptist again. Who's bright idea was it to include this guy in the scriptures that are supposed to prepare us for the coming of the baby Jesus? Not mine, I can assure you of that!

But there he is and here we are so we're going to have to make the best of it. and of course the reason he's stuck here in Advent with us is that John's whole purpose was preparation, getting people ready for the coming ministry of Jesus.

That is the whole purpose of the Advent season as well. It is why the church created the season of Advent as the beginning of the church year; in preparation for the coming birth of Jesus. It is a spiritual preparation that is I think can serve as a counterbalance to all the festive, often commercial, activities that go on during this lead up to Christmas.

The choir's anthem this morning, recalling the parable of the bridesmaids who forget to bring extra oil and therefore are unprepared for the coming of the groom and left out of the celebration, reminds us of the importance of this spiritual preparation.

Advent, and its more serious themes of looking inward and repentance, as well as the typical themes of hope, peace, joy, and love, help us to go deeper so that the Christmas celebration can be deeper as well.

So as difficult as it is to listen to John's message when what we really want is a nice joyful one let's see where this leads.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%203:7-18&version=MSG>, Accessed December 11, 2009

One commentator suggested that John's message this morning is really a nicely formed three point sermon. He starts with a warning of coming judgement, moves to a little ethical exhortation, and closes with a word of messianic expectation. Quite well rounded for a prophetic utterance.<sup>2</sup>

The parts of this which seem the most challenging are the beginning and end of this little sermon, especially the warnings about tree and chaff being burned in the fire. Feels too much like a fire and brimstone kind of sermon for our day and age.

However, it does get our attention and that perhaps was at least part of John's reason for leading and ending with these kinds of words; to get the people's attention and make them think about their lives and their relationship, or lack of relationship to God.

And they apparently worked, for the people were challenged by John's words and asked, so what should we do? And here is where this passage gets interesting.

Because John doesn't give them some long theological treatise on what they need to believe or some complicated set of steps they need to follow to turn their lives around.

In essence he tells them three things they need to do: share, be fair, don't bully.<sup>3</sup>

As I thought about those simple instructions they called to mind the well known piece by Robert Fulghum, All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. Do you remember that? Looked it up and thought it was worth sharing again.

"Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in Kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandbox at nursery school.

These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work some every day.

Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the plastic cup. The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

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<sup>2</sup> David Lose, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect\\_date=12/13/2009#](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=12/13/2009#), accessed December 11, 2009

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the plastic cup - they all die. So do we.

And then remember the book about Dick and Jane and the first word you learned, the biggest word of all: LOOK . Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation, ecology and politics and sane living.

Think of what a better world it would be if we all - the whole world - had cookies and milk about 3 o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap. Or if we had a basic policy in our nation and other nations to always put things back where we found them and clean up our own messes. And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.”<sup>4</sup>

So often in religion, and I am as guilty as anyone, we tend to make things difficult and complicated. Sometimes we preachers like to show off our wealth of knowledge and depth of theological insight and forget that most of this stuff is pretty simple; still difficult to put into practice, but the concepts are simple. Share, be fair, don't bully.

And maybe that's all the real preparation we need to do this Advent season. Not overly complicated, but important none the less. Look to find more ways to share, like our gifts to the IHN families, be fairer, like leaving generous tips when we're out to eat, and don't bully when we're out shopping for Christmas gifts.

Maybe it doesn't seem like much, but if we as people of faith, can do a really good job at that this Advent season, we may bring some very unexpected joy into the lives of folks who need a little extra joy this Christmas. And a little extra joy; that's some really good news. Amen?

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Fulghum, <http://www.teacherweb.com/NC/WilliamsTownshipElementary/CheriBarkley/AllIEverReallyNeededtoKnow.htm> , accessed December 11, 2009