

It's Time to Make Changes

Luke 3:7-18

Prepare the Way of the Lord

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On this fourth Sunday of Advent I am completing a series of sermons on John the Baptist. Last Summer when I outlined this series, it seemed like a good idea. John was called to prepare the way for Jesus. Advent is a time of preparation. I thought it was a perfect match. But today, three days from Christmas Eve, I am wondering if an angry prophet calling people a brood of vipers is exactly the thing that is going to get us in the Christmas mood. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees," John told his congregation. "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. . . . So with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people."

In my sermon notes this week, I put a big question mark next to that last sentence. Good news? How can judgement be good news? I began wondering how you would respond if some morning one of the Associate Pastors stood to give the Call to Worship saying, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath that is to come?" Would you be glad that you came to church today? Would you think that you were about to hear good news? But the scriptures tells us that this message brought the crowds out. All Judea came to hear John. Why?

Occasionally one of my theological journals will wrestle with the question of why so many people tune into television preachers who just scream at the camera. If you have ever listened to one of these preachers you almost have to move back from the television. Their words are so harsh. Their warnings are so severe. "Repent! You better repent or you will burn." Some of the theological journals speculate that judgement preaching is popular when there is a wide gulf between social-economic classes, as a reminder a day of reckoning comes for all. Other theologians believe in times of confusion and unhappiness, like these times, people stop caring about the world and look for a little judgement on it. Still other scholars believe that people who watch these shows assume that the preacher is never talking about them, but always about their neighbors who, frankly, they think deserve a little judgement.

As a pastor, who has talked to people of most every walk in life, I argue with these journals. I believe that the message of judgement has always been popular because we know we deserve it. Having been evaluated and measured from the day from we were born; having to constantly hear the message "try harder" from teachers, parents, employers, and kids; having to face the sharpest of all critics, that same person who keeps showing up in the mirror every morning no matter how hard we try to make changes, in our hearts we know that our lives are not good enough. I'm not at all surprised that a great crowd gathered around John the Baptist. People always flock to anyone who has the courage to tell the truth. "Judgement? Amen. You preach it, brother John."

We are now living in an era that has presented us with lots of alternative messages to John's judgement. It isn't hard to find someone to tell us, "You don't need to be judged. No one has a right to evaluate your lifestyle. Don't ever believe someone who is just being judgmental." Last Monday in the Wall Street Journal, Dennis Prager noted that prior to 1975 dictionaries didn't even contain the word judgmental. But today, "judging evil is widely considered worse than doing evil." Now we hear, "Just do your thing, and don't let anybody give you any stuff for it." "Just be positive." "Just be sincere, and you will be fine." "I'm okay. You're okay." In fact, there

are so many of these messages that their proliferation only illustrates that we haven't yet found a sound bite that we believe. We are still stuck with our guilty consciences. We still regret the mistakes we have made. We still ache that we hurt the people we love the most. We would love to have a second chance.

After John had warned the people of the judgement that was coming, they didn't argue or protest their innocence. They simply asked, "What then should we do?" That is what we really want to know. Haven't we about had our fill of those who tell us we aren't so bad and we should blame someone else for our problems? We know what we have done! What we don't know is what we should do about it. To the people's question, John replied, "Whoever has two coats should share with anyone who has none. Tax collectors should not cheat. Soldiers should not bully people. And be content with your wages." These prescriptions are striking in their obvious simplicity. John is not telling people things they did not know. He is not asking them to withdraw into the desert or to do anything heroic. He is simply telling them to do the right thing. To this list we could add other things that we know to be right. "Don't steal time from your spouse or children. Stop complaining so much. Always be gentle. Give freely to those in need. Honor your commitments." Doing the right thing isn't complicated. No, but it is hard. Because it asks us to keep giving.

When I was in graduate school, I had a friend who was from China. I noticed at a Christmas party that when he passed out his presents he always used two hands to do it. I had seen other Asians do this, but that night I asked my friend why he always used two hands to pass out gifts. He said that it was more than a matter of being polite. "We always give and receive gifts with two hands because for a moment we share the present, not hiding or withholding anything."

This week we are about to do a lot of giving. We will give to our friends and family. We will give to the church. We will give to the kettle on street corner. But how much of it is really two handed giving? It isn't complicated. "If you have two coats give to anyone who has none." But it is hard to give without hiding or withholding back. If that is what John means by repentance, then we are in big trouble.

Last Thursday I saw a wonderful example of two handed giving. I received a call that Kees Huijssoon was dying at home. When I arrived, I passed the doctor who was leaving him for the last time. I did what pastors do in such a situation. I embraced the family. I sat down and listened to them. I reminded them of the resurrection. I prayed and quoted a few scriptures. But the most powerful message in the room came from his wife. After 49 years of following her husband around the globe, she spent the last years giving all her attention to the overwhelming demands created by one stroke after another. Eventually it robbed her beloved husband of his mind. Death is never pretty or romantic. It is always messy. It smells bad. It drains all the energy out of those who care for the dying. But at the end of Mr. Huijssoon's life I saw his wife caress his brow, moistened his lips with a cloth, and whisper things in his ear until he had gone home. She hid and withheld nothing from him.

On Friday evening we planned his funeral. One hour later, my wife and I were entertaining a group of newly married couples in our home. I could not resist telling them that I just saw how their marriages will end - if they are blessed. When I got Mrs. Huijssoon's permission to tell this story, she said, of course, and added. "It hasn't always been easy, but it was never a burden. It was just love."

That is what we want. Who doesn't want to spend life giving and receiving that kind of love? The problem is that we have been so hurt so many times, that we close our hands around our hearts

too tightly. If you have been hurt by someone you once trusted, or by someone at work, or even by the church, you know how awful it feels. You don't ever want to be hurt like that again. So instead of really giving yourself to others, you make a fist to shake at any who may take something away from you. But when you are clutching at something, you can neither give or receive love which always requires two open hands. So when John tells us just to do the right thing, we have to say, "I know what I ought to do, but I can't." The problem isn't knowing what we ought to do. The problem isn't even wanting to do what we ought to do. The problem is taking the risk in doing it. It's just too frightening. We need help, more help than John and his warning of judgement can give us. We are going to have to find someone more powerful than John.

Now you and I are ready for Christmas. Now we are ready for a Savior. Now we are ready to receive God's two handed gift of himself. He held nothing back. In the birth of Jesus Christ, God gave you himself, all that he had to give. Until you have personally received that love, you will never be able to make the changes you want to make in your life. Because until you have received his love that forgives, and gives and gives again, you will never become a changed person. You see, real religion is not about making changes in your life. It is about being changed by God's love.

So come this week and join Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds and wise men from of old, and bow your knee before the manger. At last, you will then find the powerful love of God is born in you as well. It will change everything.

In the silence that fills our frightened souls, O God, speak to us your word - that even judgement is good news if it brings us to the Savior. Amen.