

"What's Going On Here?" Mal.3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-18
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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Sunday, December 6, 2009

I love to think about how John the Baptist would handle the job of greeter on Sunday morning. With his dread locks and sandals, munching on a grasshopper, would he even offer to shake your hand or would he just say something like: "What are you doing here? Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ... Please make a nametag..."

John's preaching is not exactly the stuff of which good Christmas Cards are made. You know the kind: There's a beautiful Christmas Tree on the cover. You get that wonderful, warm feeling as you open it up to read: "The axe is laid to the root! - - but have a blessed Christmas."

Here we are: beginning the second week in Advent. Christmas is fast approaching and we are treated to a story from the ministry of John the Baptist.

What is he doing here in Advent?

John is a prophet in that great tradition of Hebrew Prophecy. He is in line with Amos and Isaiah, with Jeremiah and Jonah and, of course, Elijah. John has words of warning and a call to repentance:

"Get right with God before it's too late!" His word from God has direct social implications and those who came to hear him knew it.

Getting right with God means getting right with others. But this is nothing new. They, and we, have heard it all before, and yet - - people flocked to John down by the water side.

Why was that? What drew them to him? It wasn't a new message. Could it be it was because of John himself - This odd duck with his rough clothes and locust lunch?

Was it because they needed someone who - finally - could break through their facades, drag them out of their denial, and hold up a mirror long enough for them to see themselves as they really were?

Or, were they heading out to hear John and to be baptized by him because God's Spirit was on the move and was putting them on a collision course with John and his message? Was the Spirit of God telling them that John had something to say that they needed to hear?

Could it be that the times were bad enough that John's voice of "rock 'em, sock 'em", apocalyptic hope was what they really were longing to hear?

I would wager that along with these reasons many were drawn to him by the pain in their own lives, by the awareness, deep in their souls, that there was more to life than what they were experiencing. They were in pain - spirit and soul pain.

And I think this kind of pain, this kind of longing, makes one open and receptive to God's word - - especially when it is a word of hope, a word of Good News, a word of release from captivity.

What was going on here is that John was speaking Truth. But it was nothing new. It was nothing they didn't already know. And yet, somehow John was able to create a deep longing for God and a sense of urgency that could not be put off.

You see: The message hadn't changed, but they had.

This is often our experience too when we are finally receptive to the Word. When the old ways of living and loving and relating to others no longer work, no longer make sense.

When the pain of separation, of loneliness, of guilt and despair becomes too great - - we are ready to listen to a prescription for pain relief.

As we all know, pain is a powerful motivator. It can force us to exercise, force us to eat right, force us to listen to someone else. Pain can lead us to follow a prescription or a regimen "religiously", as they say.

The crowds that heard John were moved to a point of urgency. They asked: "What must we do?" John's answers show that he knew their vocations and their lives. John knew what was going on.

He didn't give them BIG tasks, things that were hopelessly out of reach. He gave them practical, down-to-earth, measurable, socially responsible goals that, if followed, could bring their lives into the path of repentance and righteousness.

His prescription for them might sound like this to our ears:

- Go through your closet and share something you haven't worn for a month of Sundays with someone who hasn't seen anything new in their wardrobe for at least that long;
- Practice honesty in your business and social dealings with others;
- Treat others with the respect, dignity and loving care you would want to receive;
- Let others know they have nothing to fear from you, either by what you say or do. Let them know that the power you may have over them will never be used by you to wrong them or abuse them.

What was going on in John's preaching is the same thing that goes on today when the Gospel message comes in contact with our lives. It's nothing new. It's the same thing that we have heard and seen and experienced many times before.

What makes it new TODAY (and everyday) is that it has the capacity to overcome us with wonder at the sheer magnitude of God's grace and forgiving love. It can grab hold of us and turn us around and make us realize that we simply cannot go back to living and loving and behaving in our old selfish, self-centered ways.

When that happens, the Good News becomes GOOD NEWS!

When our discipleship is not based on dread of God's wrath, but on the death of Christ - - FOR US! - - when our hearts are captured by the LOVE of God, not by the LURE of the desire to keep up with the crowd, then John's message is always redemptive because it leads us to the One who, yes, has the winnowing fork in his hands, but whose PRIMARY aim is to save the wheat, not to burn the chaff.

I believe this is John's aim too. He is about transformation and preparation for a kingdom that is **ALREADY** here, already present among us. John is not trying to beat us up with our sins, but to create an urgent desire to bring our lives into proper alignment with the life-giving power of God in Christ.

John wants each of us to lay claim to the newness of the Old, Old Story, in such a way that it makes it impossible for us to go back to the "same old, same old" patterns of behavior and relating to others that we may have become comfortable with, but which nevertheless spell disaster for us.

The Good News is that we can change, we can repent and turn back toward God and feel the warmth of God's love that is already embracing us. We can come to this table with an earnest and honest desire to live differently, to express our love differently, to believe that with God all things are possible.

And so we continue our journey through this Advent season with the preaching of John to shake us up and the star of Bethlehem to set us straight and guide us, from however far away we may be, closer to the heart of God.

Thanks be to God.