

Joyous Generosity

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Zephaniah 3:14-20
Isaiah 12
Luke 3:7-18

God is bursting in and breaking through — at least that is what we keep saying this advent season. Have we seen it in light, in action?

Each week the voices of the prophets call to us. The prophetic voice can sound threatening or like good news, depending where you sit. Given that we here at Hyattsville Mennonite can very easily be described as people of power, it is often a challenge to hear the prophetic word. Yet we dare to repeat the words of the prophets, year after year, week after week, day by day because though it may be threatening, the prophetic word is good news, to somebody.

This morning, we have Isaiah, Zephaniah and John the Baptist, all shouting and carrying on.

Isaiah reminds us that, *“Yes, God, you were angry with me but your anger has abated and now you are a comfort. Therefore...Sing praises to YHWH, for God has triumphed. Let this be known throughout the world! Cry out, shout aloud... for the Holy One of Israel dwells among us in majesty!”*

Zephaniah's message today is a bit more introspective:

Yahweh your God is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. ¹⁶On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. Yahweh will rejoice over you with gladness and will show you love once more; ¹⁹I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. I will rescue the lost

and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰I will gather you and bring you home...

John the Baptist, as always, is a little rougher around the edges. And he does get specific. Though his message is not as gentle as what we hear from Zephaniah this morning, John's wilderness ministry did attract a lot of followers. Even so, he calls the crowd snakes, children of snakes.

When the gospel writer of Matthew tells this story, it is the religious leaders that John tags as vipers, but in Luke it is the whole crowd. *"Produce good fruit as a sign of your repentance. And don't presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Sarah and Abraham as our parents.' The ax is already laid at the root of the tree; every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and tossed into the fire."*

In the face of John's explosive message, Matthew's religious leaders are silent. Perhaps his accusation of their reliance on being the children of Abraham cuts too close to the base of the tree. They are comfortable with their roles in the temple and society and no desert preacher is going to shake them out of their zone.

But Luke's version gives us a whole crowd of snakes and they take his words to heart. They respond not with silence, but with open minds, ears and hearts. "What can we do? If the ax is at the tree trunk ready to cut it down, what can we do to bear fruit?"

These people — tax collectors and soldiers — may not consider themselves children of Abraham and Sarah. Certainly their roles in society are

not as respectable as those the religious leaders play. They are willing to get out of their comfort zones and hear more from John. They risked this much, following this firebrand out into the desert; they might as well take the next step and hear what it really means to bear fruit. And John gives very concrete answers though by now we hear his responses as metaphor or analogy rather than understanding them as real instructions.

Here in the desert, the people ask, *“What should we do?”*¹¹ John answers them, *“Whoever has two tunics must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”*¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they asked, *“Teacher, what should we do?”*¹³ He said to them, *“Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”*¹⁴ Soldiers also asked, *“And we, what should we do?”* He said to them, *“Do not bully anyone. Don’t accuse anyone falsely. Be content with your pay.”*

John has that strange gift of touching people where they are and, for a moment, getting them out of their comfort zones. They are genuinely moved to ask what they can do, what they should do, to be part of repentance, this movement of hope.

His simple answer, “be generous and just.” This so amazes them that they wonder if John is the Messiah. Their response is not like the rich, young ruler later in Luke 18. That one asked what he should do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus told him what he could do with his inheritance. “Sell it all and give the money to the poor.” This instruction made him sad because while he was faithful to the law, he was also quite attached to his stuff.

But here, with the “brood of vipers,” there is no such sadness. *The people were full of anticipation, wondering whether John might be the Messiah.* We get the sense that his instructions are more than metaphor for them; they are ready to do what John asks.

John, sensing their excitement, responds to the unvoiced question of the people. He counters their anticipation by telling them that he is not the messiah; he is just the one who prepares the way. The One who is more powerful is yet to come.

This is the season of anticipation. Like those followers of John we too are anticipating the Messiah. We are waiting for the coming of Jesus again at Christmas. Anticipation is half the fun. We prepare surprises, we plan special secrets, we imagine what the future might hold.

I know a family where anticipation is not appreciated. It is seen as an annoyance. The parents prefer avoiding anticipation with their children because the accompanying excitement is too bothersome and distracting. I have some sympathy for this parent’s dilemma, but when we are deprived of anticipation we miss the joy of preparing, dreaming and imagining. And anticipation is not idle waiting, it is active preparation for the big event.

So while I often see John the Baptist as an insignificant prelude to Jesus, for the people in the desert he was more than that. He helped them remember that they were looking for the messiah. And told them how they can help usher in that reign.

It is this messiah, who baptizes with the spirit and with fire, for whom we prepare this advent season. As we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ, for the reign of God, John calls to us as well. It is tempting to those of us who are the children of Abraham (or Calvin or Luther or Menno) to rest on our pedigree rather than ask with the tax collectors and soldiers, “and we, what should we do?”

What would it look like for us to bear fruit?

Notice what John says to the tax collectors is not the same as what he says to the soldiers. And it is not the same as what Jesus says to the rich young ruler. Each is called to bear fruit, to respond, though not necessarily in the exact same way. The religious leaders in Matthew had no response; the rich young ruler is sad and silent. The despised tax collectors and soldiers are willing to listen and then act.

Last week during children’s time, LeAnne showed all the many things we need to accumulate to prepare for a baby. This week John the Baptist tells us the things we need to let go of in order to be prepared for the Messiah.

Bearing fruit — getting ready — doesn’t necessarily mean more, it might mean less. Maybe fewer gifts, less food, more time, more joy.

What might it mean for you to bear fruit? What might it mean for you to prepare for the coming of the Messiah?

In John’s example, generosity and justice are part of the fruit basket. For the followers of John it was sharing clothing and food, not taking more than their share, treating people with respect, being content. It is not only generosity of the material world, but a generosity of spirit as well. For me this probably means less

control over others, less worry about the expectations of others, more silence, more singing. Less trying to do it exactly right and more taking a risk to at least do something.

Though John the Baptist seems like a grumpy prophet, I can't help thinking that along with the generosity he recommends, comes joy. If it is fruit we are after, it is ripe, sweet fruit, not hard, green inedible fruit that makes our mouths pucker. Bearing fruit gives us joy.

So what will be our response when we hear this message from John the Baptist? "What shall we do?"

This question may make us tremble in fear. It may overwhelm us thinking about bearing the fruit of repentance. But with John, let's get concrete. It may mean calling or writing a letter to your senator about health care reform to voice your concern for those who have no health care. It may be driving your car less and observing nature and people around you more.

But it may be as simple as working together, as some of us did yesterday with Iglesia to clean up the church property. It may be as delicious as sharing food and your story with someone at the fellowship meal. It may be as sweet as sharing a hymnal with the child next to you and joining your voices in praise. Whatever way you choose to bear fruit this season, and I hope you will, choose a way that not only brings goodness and justice to the world but a way that brings joy and hope as well.

Yahweh is in our midst. Bear fruit worthy of repentance. The lost will be rescued, the outcast gathered in. Shout aloud and sing for joy.