

Sermon for Advent 3 Dec 12th 2021

Philippians 4 4-7 Luke 3 7-18

Who is this strange fiery preacher, This John the Baptist? What does he have to say to us who live in such a very different world?

I'd like to begin with inviting you, as we've occasionally done before, to come back in your imagination to his world, first century Palestine- - and hear this gospel message in a new version as if for the very first time. It helps if you're willing to close your eyes, but don't go to sleep! Are you ready? Eyes closed. Imaginations switched on.

You're living in dark and anxious times under the heel of the hated Romans. You've been told time and again that God has promised to send his messiah to save your people but it's been four hundred long years since the last prophet appeared. You've probably given up hope that it could happen in your lifetime. However, recently you've heard intriguing rumours that a new prophet has appeared out in the wilderness, preaching powerfully and baptising down by the Jordan River.. It's a very arid, stony, wild and scary place. There might be wild animals ..bandits..you might get lost. Should you risk it? Well, there seem to be plenty of other people going out there to see for themselves. Right! You decide to join them..you're feeling excited as well as afraid- -but you're going!

Now keep your eyes closed and hear this new version of our reading from "The Message" as if for the very first time:

⁷⁻⁹ When crowds of people come out for baptism because it's the popular thing to do, John explodes: "Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snake skins 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 ten a penny. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and flourishing? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire."

¹⁰ The crowd ask him, "Then what are we supposed to do?"

"If you have two coats, give one away," Do the same with your food."

¹² Tax men also come to be baptized and say, "Teacher, what should we do?"

¹³ "No more extortion—collect only what is required by law."

¹⁴ Soldiers ask him, "And what should we do?"

“No harassment, no blackmail—and be content with your rations.”

¹⁵ The interest of the people by now is building. They’re all beginning to wonder, “Could this John be the Messiah?”¹⁶⁻¹⁷ But John intervenes: “I’m baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to sweep the house clean—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the rubbish to be incinerated”

Let all that sink in for a moment then come gently back to the twenty first century and open your eyes.

John’s first words sound harsh and strange to our modern ears, but he’s a prophet in the Jewish Old Testament tradition. He comes like their other prophets down the centuries to call them back to the ways of God. He warns them against abusing the privilege of a family tree that has a long prior relationship with God: “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor.’” If anyone thinks that ancestry, ethnicity, place of origin, language or any other status-marker or identity—including within the church, allows them to lord it over others or lets them off the hook, they are totally wrong. If the [family] tree doesn’t produce good fruit—if the community doesn’t live in such a way that its life illustrates its relationship with God—it might as well, metaphorically, be kindling for a bonfire.

Yes the words are very harsh but the promise is sure: “One who is more powerful than I is coming ... and soon now! He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

It’s good to be reminded that John’s message is meant for a people who wait with eager longing for a Saviour, then and now. If they can’t claim special privilege based on their heritage, neither can we. But alongside his dire warnings John’s promise is sure: he is preparing the way for someone much greater than he..one who will change everything from the inside out and baptise not with water but with the Holy spirit.

The crowd ask John a very simple question:, **What should we do?**

In response John gives very simple answers. He speaks directly to temptations inherent to each group—particularly that of grasping after “more” at the expense of others. That temptation is familiar enough today. He admonishes the crowds to share their resources. As for the tax-collectors, don’t be greedy. Soldiers, don’t abuse power.

John the Baptist calls God’s people to repentance and shows what that looks like. His instructions make it clear that it’s not enough simply to be sorry. We’ve heard often enough that the basic meaning of the word we translate as repent means to turn in a new direction. It’s lived out in the everyday practices of life. That will mean different things for different people. Each one of us has to work out what it means right now in

our own uncertain times in our own particular situations, as individuals, as members of our church community and of society.

If John's message of repentance was the end of the story, the people would leave the wilderness with little more than a story to tell and a to-do list. But of course it's not the end. He is preparing the way for the coming of Christ who makes all the difference. We can rejoice because we don't have a to-do list to struggle with all on our own. The good news John brings is that God sends One with gifts greater than the crowd can ever imagine- - the Holy spirit- - the very breath and power of God to change things and make us new every time we turn to him.

You may remember that Jesus himself comes to John for baptism and they are given an amazing spiritual experience. You may remember too that John is put in prison not long afterwards for his courage in speaking truth to power, speaking out against Herod's wrongdoing, and is finally beheaded. While he's suffering in prison he begins to have doubts. John's followers reporting all they've observed of Jesus are puzzled because he seems so different from the traditional prophets. Finally John sends them to ask Jesus directly, "Are you the one who is to come or do we wait for another?" Jesus sends back his answer referring to the prophet Isaiah: "tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised the poor have good news brought to them". This would have reassured John completely.

When Paul wrote those wonderful words we heard from his letter to the little fledgling church he had founded in first century Philippi, he himself was in prison. Why? Because he refused to stop preaching this great good news !.

While I was mulling over all of this and feeling somewhat overwhelmed by so much to be done at this crazy time of year, I had a sudden vivid memory of putting some of my now grown up grandchildren to bed when they were little. I remembered them telling me when they said their prayers they did their thank yous, their sorries and last of all their pleases. I felt God calling me very strongly to simply chill and turn back to that little regular teaspoon prayer routine - -TSP- - thank you, sorry, please.

I was reminded that this Jesus, first proclaimed by John, shows us in his life, death and resurrection that whatever life throws at us, however we may be feeling, God understands.

As we get closer to our celebration of Christmas let's keep that at the forefront of our minds. It's not the end of the world if our preparations aren't perfect or our cards are late, we can't get everything on our shopping list or our plans fall apart. God loves us and he will freely forgive us and strengthen us by his holy spirit day by day if we turn and ask him. May his light and life fill us and overflow into the world around us this advent, this coming Christmas and always. Amen.

Carole Lewis