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Advent 3: Luke 3: 7-18
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I warned you last week that this was coming – John the Baptist head on – “you brood of vipers” and winnowing fork in hand. Last week we had this moment where we saw the ways that what God has done and is doing and will do are all coming together and be inspired to hope in that. This week we are introduced to the not so fun part of the work God is inviting us into. It is not a gentle invitation to Advent, and let’s be honest, no one wants to be chastised by John the Baptist this close to Christmas – it would be nicer if it came along at say the beginning of Lent when we are primed for repentance. But here it is now.

For some of you, this may not be the message you need today. For some of you, this may not be the message you want to hear, but it may be the one you need to. But John had the same message for all who came seeking in the wilderness – a call to change, to live more fully into God’s call. Inertia didn’t bring you here today, you could be at home with coffee and the newspaper, you have all come seeking, even if you don’t know what you are seeking, and if what you find is going to make any difference in your life, you have to change.

Change before Christmas, ugh. Unless, unless that change is going to really make a difference – that it really will make me sense God more closely – to see God come near. John the Baptist was preparing the people to see God when he came near in Jesus, and they must have sensed

¹When I deliver a sermon, I do not read from the text, so this text matches the audio only in substance.

that. He wasn't doing miracles out there. He was offering a harsh message that who you are and what you are doing in the world is not what God has asked of you and you need to change. Why would the crowds gather in the wilderness around him? It wasn't just religious Jews he drew to him; the crowd including tax collectors and soldiers, personas non grata at most religious gatherings. The message resonated with the people who were there; I'm not who God wants to be; I'm not doing what God wants me to do. Everybody is not getting a trophy at the end of this life; it matters what I do.

For John the Baptist, repentance has less to do with inner work and having the right values and beliefs; it has to do with what one does. It is the phrase from the people repeated the most in the text here: What should we do?

First John responds to the crowd: "Share with one another. If you have two coats give one to someone who has none. If you have more food than you need give some away to someone who is hungry." In other words, if you want to get right with God, be generous.

Then it's the tax collectors turn. The tax collectors in John's day paid the Roman overlords for the privilege of collecting tolls and tariffs and customs fees. Then they extorted as much money as possible from the populace to recoup their initial outlay and make a profit. To their "What should we do?" John responds, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed." If you want to get right with God, show integrity.

Then the soldiers. Being a local mercenary for the Roman Empire was steady money but not a lot of it. Custom allowed that they might extort a bit of money from the population to supplement their life while the authorities turned a blind eye. "What should we do?" John responds, "Be satisfied with your wages." If you want to get right with God, reject greed and adopt contentment.

Generosity, integrity, contentment: signs of a life that has undergone repentance. That we are living in a way that is attentive to the needs of others and resists self-serving preoccupations. Not that repentance is a once and done thing. We can be generous in some areas of our life and not others – same is true for integrity and contentment. We have a lifetime of opportunities for change – but each change strengthens us for the next one. And really, generosity, integrity, and contentment aren't the end goals – they are ways to reflect on our lives and challenge us to turn to what God wants for us. We could certainly be content for a reasons that have nothing to do with following God, right? The point in all of this is that faith is more than talk, and that you have to face the places that you aren't doing what God is calling you to mature in that faith and better walk the talk.

No one in those crowds at the Jordan River escaped John's demand for a better life. No easy outs, no short cuts, no excuses. In all of them, John could see the potential for improvement. I wonder if that is why John drew such crowds. It can't have been his charm. People must have

kept coming to John because he asked something significant of them. He believed they could change.²

The story has been told of Abraham Lincoln who worshiped each and every Wednesday when in Washington D.C. at New York Presbyterian Church near the White House.

One Wednesday evening as Lincoln was leaving the service, one of his assistants asked him:

"Mr. President, what did you think of the sermon tonight?"

Lincoln responded, "The content was excellent, and Dr. Gurley spoke with great eloquence. It was obvious that he put a great deal of work into that sermon."

"Then you thought it was a great sermon, Mr. President?" the assistant asked.

"No, I did not say that."

"But Sir, you said it was excellent sermon."

Lincoln replied, "No, I said that content was excellent and that the preacher spoke with eloquence. But Dr. Gurley, on this night, forgot one important matter. He forgot to ask us to do something great."³

John the Baptist was never shy about asking his listeners to do something great. He shaped the challenge to each group – he knew where to push the button and invite people to come face-to-face with a real challenge in their life. A place where what God called them to do did not line up with the self-serving activity they were either intentionally or unintentionally pursuing. He

²Inspired by a sermon on the same text by The Rev. Dr. Robert Baggott http://day1.org/4400-getting_there

³ McCarthy, Dan, "Great Leadership" Newsletter, February 10, 2011 cited by sermon linked below

called them to be honest with themselves. That is the great thing I ask of you today. To be honest with yourself about a place in your life that are in tension with God's desires for how you should live. Write this down - it is a line from a John O'Donahue poem called *For Longing*, and it is the kindler, gentler version of the invitation that John the Baptist offers us today. It gives you an idea of where to start: "May you have the wisdom to enter generously into your own unease."

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If you sit with that phrase for awhile, it will guide you to your unease, though some of you don't need much time at all. For the unease you feel is not far from your mind. It comes up every time you think of a struggling relationship in your life. Every time the credit card bill comes. Every time you see a picture of children lined up in tent cities on the border. The unease that we push away to get onto the next thing because looking at this thing – this relationship, this budget, this suffering – we feel paralyzed by how to change it.

May you have the wisdom to enter generously into your own unease. Invite God to meet you there and ask, "What should I do?" A call to change will come, and you can do it.