

## Third Sunday of Advent

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

December 13, 2009

### Luke 3:7-18

*While powerful people in Rome were colluding to rule the world, and their underlings, with cooperation from local religious authorities, were colluding to rule the Holy Land, John trudged out to the wilderness, took his stand in the River Jordan, and plunged the repentant into the waters of baptism, as he announced the coming of the Sovereign Lord.*

*John was not a man to mince words.*

He said to the crowd who were coming out to be baptized by him: “You snake spawn! Who told you to run away from the wrath that’s coming? Bear the kind of fruit that fits with repentance. And don’t you begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for a father.’ I tell you, God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones. The axe already lies at the root of the trees. Every tree that doesn’t bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into fire.”

The crowd had questions for him. They said, “What shall we do then?” He told them, “Let the one who has two tunics share with the one who has none. And let the one who has food do the same.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” He told them, “Collect nothing more than what is assigned to you.” Even soldiers had questions for him. They said, “What about us? What shall we do?” He told them, “Don’t intimidate or blackmail anyone. Let your provisions be enough.”

The people were waiting eagerly, all of them wondering in their hearts about John, whether he could be the messiah. But John had an answer for them all, “I baptize you with water. But someone stronger than I am is coming, someone whose sandal straps I’m not worthy to untie – he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire – someone whose winnowing shovel is in his hand to clean his threshing floor, to gather the grain into his storehouse, but to burn the chaff with a fire that doesn’t go out.”

With many of these and other exhortations, he announced the good news to the people.

### Sermon

A few years ago, I came to the conclusion that John the Baptist doesn’t “get” Jesus. Exhibit A in defense of that conclusion is this. From prison, John sends messengers to Jesus with a question: “Are you the one, or should we be looking for someone else?” (Mt. 11:3). Apparently Jesus wasn’t shaping up at all to be what John had expected. Where was the axe? Where was the winnowing shovel? Where was the fire? In other words, where were the justice and judgment of the God of Israel? John doesn’t “get” Jesus. That’s obvious. It’s probably best that John was beheaded. I don’t think he could have survived seeing Messiah crucified.

While I’ve thought for years now that John the Baptist doesn’t “get” Jesus, I realized the other day that I haven’t been “getting” John the Baptist. I think I’ve been missing the heart of John’s message, which isn’t so much the precise content of that message as it is the urgency of it. John is convinced of the importance of “today,” the day when Jesus comes. That’s a message we all need to hear.

**No matter how it unfolds, the decisive moment in the story occurs when Jesus comes.** John has his own picture of the coming of the messiah. He pictured wrath and destruction. He pictured a narrow escape, if any. It was a terrifying picture. But it was the expected picture. So much so that people wondered if John himself were the messiah. John, of course, was not the messiah. But he was preparing the way, preparing the way for Messiah and for his day, the day when he comes.

So he challenged everyone who came to him to change their ways. No one was exempt. Everyone had changes to make. Everyone had repenting to do. The time had come for them to change their thinking, to change their attitude, to change their behavior. For soldiers, for tax collectors, for ordinary people, there was no time to lose. Because John was already here. And because someone stronger than John was not far behind.

Whenever Jesus comes, it’s time to change. So when Jesus walks along the Galilean lakeside toward James and John and says to them, “Follow me,” they leave their nets, they leave their boat, they leave their

father, and they follow him. And so when a jail-keeper in Philippi witnessed the power of Jesus and heard the word of the Lord, he fell to his knees, he welcomed the news, and with his family he was baptized. And baptism, don't forget, is a sign of dying and rising, a sign of ending one way of life and beginning another, following Jesus. And so when I met up with Jesus, through his church and through his word, it was time for me to change. Time to replace skepticism with faith. Time to replace ignorance with understanding. Time to replace aimless contentment with the discontent of discipleship.

Whenever Jesus comes, it's time to change. And Jesus will come to us every day.

Jesus comes to us when we pray. As Frederick Beuchner said, that's really what we're praying for. Jesus comes to us when we open the Scriptures, expecting to meet him there. Jesus comes to us when we gather in his name. That's his promise. It struck me at evening prayer two weeks ago: Jesus is here with us right now; I can welcome his presence; I can just sit here and enjoy his presence. And Jesus is here with us now, though that's harder to notice on Sunday morning. Because once the liturgy starts, we're busy until it's over. But he's here. Jesus is here.

I admit, though, that I don't often recognize Jesus' presence. In fact, I probably would prefer that he not be around, that he not be with me. So I rush through my prayers. And I don't bother to linger over a passage or a verse or a word of Scripture. And I stay as busy as I can during worship. All to keep Jesus at bay. Because whenever Jesus comes, it's time to change. But I settle into routines and like to hang on to them. I grow comfortable with the ways I prefer to think and act, and I'm not eager to examine them and adjust them. I bet I'm not the only one!

But whenever Jesus comes, and he will come to us every day — whenever Jesus comes, it's time to change. Because whenever Jesus comes, we have reached a decisive moment in the story. We have come to the "day" that John the Baptist recognized so well.

**And John's message, his urgent message — we ignore it at our own peril.** John's presence at the Jordan River called people, compelled them, to make a decision.

Cross the line.

Step over the edge.

Step into the water.

God is coming.

God is about to reclaim his throne — little did John suspect that the throne would be a cross! — so get on God's side.

Prepare yourself — prepare your heart, prepare your mind, prepare your spirit — to welcome God's presence, God's saving, changes everything presence.

Die to everything else that claims you.

The fear that keeps you from sharing.

The greed that keeps you grasping for more than you need.

The lure of power that tempts you to take advantage of people, where you can get away with it.

Die even to the confidence you have in your religion.

Die to it all, and embrace new life.

Welcome God's Holy Spirit to change your thinking, to change your attitude, to change your behavior.

To change you in a big way.

To change you little by little every day, every day that Jesus comes.

And Jesus will come to us every day.

How will this happen, this change? Is there a special method or technique? No. I don't think so. What we need to do is ask. Ask the Holy Spirit. Ask for it, wanting to receive it. Ask again and again. Ask, and the change will come. Maybe not dramatically. Probably not dramatically. Not with wind and fire. But slowly, over time, little by little, change will come, as the waters of your baptism flow over your hard edges and reshape you to become more and more beautiful in your Father's eyes.

Ask, and the change will come. And the time to ask is now. The axe is already at the root of the trees. But ask, and the Spirit will begin to cut, not the roots, but the dead branches in you. And then there will be more room, in time, for you to grow and to blossom and to bear fruit, the fruit of faithfulness.

That's where John the Baptist leads me today, now that I've begun to "get" his message.

John leads us to prepare the way of the Lord, today! To prepare for the Lord to come to us and to come through us.

And that is why we listen to John during Advent.