

## **“Who Invited John for the Holidays?”**

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ December 15, 2024

Zephaniah 3:14-20 and Luke 3:7-18

Sometimes I resent the way John the Baptist intrudes upon the loveliness of this festive season. After all, these are the weeks when we're busy decorating our homes, baking cakes and cookies for the holiday parties, and singing some of the most beautiful music in our religious tradition. And year after year, we bump into this desert prophet, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness”. He's a square peg for the round holes in our Advent calendars.

When I started examining today's reading from Luke's gospel, I was struck by the final verse, verse 18, which says, “So, with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people.” In my first notes, I wrote down the phrase “GOOD NEWS?”

Therefore, I was relieved to discover that I'm not alone in thinking it odd that Luke would describe the “exhortations” of John as “GOOD NEWS”. Professor Rudolf Bultmann would not accept the New Revised Standard Version of this verse, which reads, “He proclaimed the good news to the people.” No, said Bultmann, that Greek verb cannot mean “proclaimed good news” after you listen to what John has just preached. And William Barclay said, “Whatever the message of John was, it was not a gospel. It was not good news; it was news of terror.”

But then why do so many English translations go ahead and say John preached “GOOD NEWS”? And why does the church insist on pushing John the Baptist into the Advent season like a holiday party crasher? I started wondering whether there might be some good news here after

If John's message is going to be good news to us, then we must expect change.

The multitude came out to be baptized by John. Even if some of the crowd should be dismissed as merely curious, most of them knew John was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. There were two parts to that message – repentance and forgiveness – and together they describe a process

of conversion, a change of attitude, personality, and behavior. The crowds came expecting they might change even though they could not predict exactly how.

The people were filled with expectation. They were watching for something they weren't even sure they could recognize if they saw it. Their mood was like that of an audience at a theater about to see a play or a movie. They were waiting, though they didn't know just what would happen or just when it would happen. Perhaps, some thought, John the Baptist is a preview of the drama we're expecting.

That kind of expectant attitude is a precondition of recognizing the good news in John's message. Without such a mind-set, his words seem like harsh static interrupting your pretty Christmas carols.

Secondly, John's message can come across as good news if we're willing to change.

That may be too much to ask. It was too much to ask of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, at least the way Luke tells the story. Luke leaves the Sadducees out altogether even though they were probably in the audience. Luke can't picture the ones who plotted against Jesus, who arrested him, put him on trial, and crucified him, as people who were affected in any way by the preaching of John the Baptist.

Again, it was too much to ask of King Herod, who, in the passage immediately following today's lesson, shut John up in prison. Eventually, Herod beheaded John to silence him once and for all the bad news he kept hearing from this desert prophet.

On the other hand, the people who heard Peter preach at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came like the sound of a rushing wind, were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other disciples, brothers what should we do?

On the road approaching Damascus, when a great light from heaven blinded Saul of Tarsus, he asked, what am I to do, Lord?

And after an earthquake shook the foundations of the Philippian jail so hard that the gates flew wide open and everyone's chains came unfastened, the trembling jailer asked, Sir, what must I do to be saved?

In the same way, it wasn't too much to ask of the common people that they be willing to change. When they heard the powerful appeal of John the Baptist, they began asking What, then, shall we do? And John presented them with a simple suggestion: "Share your food and clothing with those who have none."

Tax collectors, despised by religious leaders for selling their souls to the Roman empire, ask John, "teacher, what should we do?" Could Matthew have been among them? Was Zacchaeus listening? They became willing to change their ways of doing business.

To people willing to change, John's message can be good news that begins a process of renewal and hope.

And lastly, for John's message to be good news, we have to, in fact, change.

This message isn't addressed to someone else; it's for anyone who hears it, including you and me. Faced with examination and evaluation of our lives, we may get defensive and scrounge for something to shield us from the blinding light of judgement.

John warned that the judgement that would accompany the coming of the Savior would mean destruction for many. Some tried to take refuge by being descendants of Abraham. After all they were children of God's promise to make a great nation, and God would not go back on that promise. They were heirs of the covenant and God would be faithful.

How would John's sermon shine a spotlight on our church? What if we heard of a coming judgment that would destroy every tree that does not bear good fruit? Would it do any good for us to say, but we're members of the church and have been so for over 30 years? What if our church membership is leading us toward hypocrisy, dishonesty, or selfishness? Would it do any good for us to say "But we are the Church and we have the promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail against us? We're not talking about the gates of hell; we're talking about God's judgement.

We can't appeal to our ancestry, our affiliations, or our achievements. The great job you did teaching Sunday School 25 years ago may not help you pass the test. Your perfect attendance at Choir rehearsals may not save you.

“Bear fruits that beget repentance!” cries John. Expect the coming Savior to make a difference, and be willing to change, but then let your change of mind and heart lead you into a change of conduct as well.

If you refuse to hear, if you refuse to face the judgement that comes, then, no matter how satisfied you are with your life as it is, you’re in danger of being thrown away with the debris. That sounds like terrible news, or, as Professor Barclay put it, News of terror.

But if you expect the Savior’s coming to change your life, and if you’re willing to become a generous, honest, and loving person with God’s merciful help, and if those changes actually occur in your life, then the message of John the Baptist finds a happy place on your Advent calendar, and year after year you’ll understand why Luke 3:18 says of the desert prophet, “HE PROCLAIMED GOOD NEWS TO THE PEOPLE.” Amen.