

## Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 3:1-20

„Ready Or Not, Here He Comes.“

December 6, 2015

John is an amazing character isn't he? Not what we would expect as we come up to Christmas. What if, riding atop the last float of the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade, there was not old Saint Nick, but a wild eyed John the Baptist dressed in a glorified burlap sack?

But this isn't mid-town Manhattan and this is not Macy's extravaganza. It has been something of a parade though, as people made their way out to the desert to hear this strange man. He is an astonishing preacher, I have to give him that. Not many would start out the way he does—he stands before the assembled crowd, stares at them with a look of disgust, then bellows, „You are a bunch of snakes.“ Wow! That should get a congregation's attention.

The crowd is equally amazing. After this insult, they must know that it is downhill from there, but they stay. Vipers...the wrath to come...repentance...trees cut down and burned...winnowing fork... unquenchable fire.“ What was John trying to do? Scare the hell out of the people...literally? And then there is the gospel writer's conclusion to this drama: „And with many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.“ Good News? Right!

What do you think? Was John preaching „good news?“ I wonder. Actually, I do not wonder. I think it was and is good news, because John, in his unique way, was saying there is hope for us, that despite all the evidence, we're not stuck with our worst selves. We can change. We can be different. We can be better...better, perhaps, than we ever thought possible. And I, for one, think that is good news, indeed.

Let's spend a few minutes looking at John's message. The heart of it is repentance. That \$2.00 „churchy“ word that means, not only being sorry for our sins, but being sorry enough to quit. The Greek behind the word means a changing of mind, a 180 degree shift. Some say, „A leopard cannot change its spots,“ „can't teach an old dog new tricks,“ and all that. At this time of year, we hear a great deal about Scrooge...always a metaphor for someone who is mean-spirited, miserly, and miserable. But the Scrooge of Dickens „A Christmas Carol“ repented, and by the end of the story becomes a generous warm-hearted benefactor. Why do we remember only the rotten in him? Is it because the world remains unconvinced of the possibility of change? Or perhaps it is that misery loves company. If no one else can change, neither should I be expected to change. John says wrong!

In that context, we begin to get a better understanding of his talk about vipers and fleeing the wrath to come. Standing on the edge of the wilderness, John is using wilderness talk. The picture he envisions is that it is not unusual to come across a brood of creepy-crawlers where you may not expect them, like right beside the river where people think they're safe. John is not simply in the name-calling business here, but he is calling a spade a spade. He knows that the people have traveled out to him and are ready for his baptism because they see it as a sort of life insurance. They're trying to escape God's wrath by being sorry.

John is not content with someone saying, „Sorry.“ Don't just talk the talk, walk the walk. John says, „Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.“ It's the idea of cleaning up your act. Your talk might declare that you have cleaned up your act, but your walk will show it.

Don't dare say, „This doesn't apply to me; I am a church member...have been all my life; I'm OK, John.“ Don't dare say, „I'm saved; I was born again on such and such day at a city-wide crusade; I'm washed in the blood of the Lamb, so John's words don't worry me.“ Don't dare say, „I read my Bible and pray everyday: I'm at church every time the doors are open—John is not talking to me.“ Maybe? Maybe not. The truth is that more folks than we care to admit sow their wild oats for six days a week then on the seventh day come in to church to pray for a crop failure. John's message is that your religion MUST make a difference in the way you live in the world and the way you treat people; if it does not, your religion is not worth beans. God is interested in your fruits not your roots.

OK, we buy that. Now what? To the preacher's credit, he does not hesitate: „The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.“ Well, John has now stopped preaching and gone to meddling. It's one thing to stand in the pulpit and rail against sin, injustice, oppression and everyone shouts Amen...Hallelujah. But it's quite another to tell folks to start giving their stuff away. That's meddling.

Perhaps you have heard the story of two farmers whose land shared a common border. They were talking about how much they cared for each other. Jack said, „Joe, if you had two tractors, you'd give me one?“ Joes said, „Right!“ Jack said, „And if you had two bulls, you'd give me one?“ Joe replied, „Right!“ Jack, „And if you had two calves, you'd give me one?“ Joe answered, „Now, Jack, you KNOW I've got two calves.“

John says, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." That does fly in the face how we celebrate Christmas, doesn't it? How many new coats will be under the tree this year? How much feasting will go on? Someone has suggested that when we share the extra coat, we have more closet space. When we who have plenty of food share it with someone who is hungry, we might discover a way to drop those ten extra pounds we picked up over Thanksgiving. That may be true, but I don't imagine John would buy that as an appropriate motivation. We share because it's right to share. PERIOD! If you want to do right, then DO IT. Someone said, It's easier to walk your way into a new way of thinking, than to think your way into a new way of walking.

Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. This was new, as they took enough to get rich. John says take only what is reasonable and no more. This would be a big change.

"Then some soldiers asked, "And what should we do?" John replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." Good advice. Solid. Reasonable. For those who were serious about leading lives that would please God, what John had so say offered hope. His suggestions were not beyond the reach of anyone. Perhaps that is why he made such an impression on the crowds. Could John be the Messiah, the Anointed One? No. John says, "One more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

Ready or not, here he comes. "You'd better watch out/You'd better not cry/You'd better not pout/I'm telling you why...No, not Santa. "One whose winnowing fork is in his hand to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." At first guess, this doesn't sound like someone I would look forward to. But in the content of what John just told us—that change is possible, that you and I can be better than we are, and that reasonable measures taken can make us better—then the coming...the Advent of this newcomer is good news indeed. Ready or not, here he comes. Are you ready?

For those who are, I have good news. Because those changes in our lives bring with them something wonderful. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians and tell them, "Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again, Rejoice!...The Lord is near." Ready or not, here he comes.