

“BROODING OVER ADVENT”

Luke 3:1-18

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Do you think John the Baptist got their attention? “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come! Even now, the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” It certainly gets to us. Once every three years, we hear Luke’s account of the coming of John the Baptist, and for Luke it’s not just the simple “prepare and repent” of the other gospels. Oh no, Luke demands our attention. You have to admit it’s effective. It’s hard to let the brood of vipers and a fiery future go by without some reaction.

So the question is why? Why does John, in Luke’s gospel, choose to shock the people? This is one of those moments when we need to think as biblical detectives rather than being so affronted by the text that we either dismiss it or deliberately turn our backs on it. So think about the world of first century Judea. Who’s going to go out to the fringes of town to hear some itinerant desert preacher? The Jews of the first century were not generally people with lots of discretionary time on their hands. To eke out a living and pay the Roman taxes - it took constant work. So we’ve got to believe that those who sought out John were not ne’er-do-wells and scoundrels for the most part, but those who took their religion seriously, those who went regularly to temple and synagogue, people who performed the sacrifices, paid their tithes and offerings, people not that different from us really. And it was that crowd John addressed in unrestrainedly contemptuous language. Why?

Luke does not leave us in suspense for long. When John the Baptist finishes his opening speech, “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our ancestor, for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham,’” the crowd cries out: “What then should we do?” Rather than choosing just to be unhappy that John is calling them names, the crowd obviously takes John seriously - which tells us something, I think, about the power of John’s preaching. He preaches dire calamitous things to these nice religious people, and instead of responding in outrage, they open to him. You know, sometimes people need to be coaxed and encouraged; and sometimes we need to be - as my former colleague, Lois, used to say - slapped upside the head. We need a jolt to see the truth that is before us. John’s words were such a jolt to the people of first century Judea. They can be that for us as well. Maybe where we are is not good enough. Maybe we have become complacent in our relationship with God. Maybe we need to prepare if we are to rightly see and respond to the baby in the manger. When we hear this text, we are supposed to be shocked, like those of old, and then it is our turn to ask “What then should we do?” For the minute we ask that question we open to the possibility that there is more for us to be and do in relationship with our God.

But what? What specifically are we to do to prepare. To answer that question, I’m going to take a backwards turn here to our first scripture reading, the song or canticle of Zachariah, one of the truly beautiful contributions to the Christian literature. Now I’m not one for being overly analytical of poetry. I think with poetic language we are more often called to stand and behold, to walk around a poem slowly listening, entering the images, feeling the rhythms, appreciating rather than analyzing. However, having said that, what caught my eye this time through this familiar scripture is that in the center of it, Zachariah sums up his understanding of the covenant between God and God’s people: that God consents to be with us, and we in return consent to live in holiness and righteousness before God.

How many times have you heard those words “holiness” and “righteousness” just like that together in the Bible. These are consummate Bible words, and what I mean by that is that they are words that are familiar and very Bible-y; and when we see them written or hear them spoken, they tend to go right over our heads. We have a vague idea of what they are about; we’re sure they belong in the Bible...and we move on. But what does it mean really to live before God in holiness... or righteousness or, as most often occurs, the two of them together. It’s worth some exploring.

Do you think that you and I are holy enough right now? Are we supposed to become more holy? How do we do that? In case I have you going, and you’re thinking down that road, I have to tell you that those are all trick questions. “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that dwells therein,” teaches the psalmist. Because we are God’s, because of the simple fact that God claims us, we are, in fact, already holy—as is all that dwells on the earth, as in the earth itself. Can we become more holy? No. I don’t think so. Holiness does not exist on a sliding scale. It either is or it isn’t. Eating breakfast with our kids is no less sacred an act than taking communion. The water we use to wash our dishes is no less holy than the water of baptism.

The issue is not our becoming more holy; what we need to do is to see and apprehend the holiness of what is. Holiness: from the same root as whole. Holiness all around us, God’s sacred Spirit connecting us with every leaf and rock and breath of creation. What would it be like if we saw that: if we knew to our souls the holiness of all that is, and so we approached all our meals as we approach communion - prayerfully, with hands extended and hearts open. What if we saw God’s gift of life and love to us in every ounce of water we use, not just those few drops that mark the cross on an infant’s head. What if we saw the image of Christ in every homeless man huddled under a bridge? How would we be different? How would the world be different?

I believe that the better we get at apprehending holiness, the more we will be changed. We will become more humble. We will be more careful. When we see someone with no coat (and notice here when I say this, I’m making a subtle sidestep back to the John the Baptist text), we will rush home to our closets and empty them of all our winter gear, then hurry back and offer it all to the one suffering from cold. We will overcome our tendency towards dishonesty. We will not abuse power. We will live more thankful for what we have than envious of what we have not.

It is our ability to see and participate in the holiness of all that is God’s that births true righteousness. When our eyes are opened, we will not be content with a stingy parsing of what God requires. We will live the righteousness of those who apprehend God’s mystery and miracles everywhere. And because of that, we will be filled with wonder but not surprise when angels fill the heavens, and God is revealed again as a newborn child in a manger.

How are we to prepare? To be part of this new covenant that God would make with us, we must go back to the beginning, to the covenants God has already made in creation and with Abraham, and we work and pray and sing, and in some moments just breathe to apprehend the sanctity of what is and our place in it. You are God’s holy work living in God’s sacred garden. Every day. In every action you undertake. Think about that. Believe that. Live into that. It is not an easy leap to make, to see the world in this new way. Only a very few saints and mystics have ever done it perfectly. But we learn one step, one face, one drop of water, one choice at a time. And so we prepare for Christmas. Thanks be to God. Amen.