

A3C 2024 Luke 3:7-18

Last Sunday some of our younger members and I were in Huntingdon for the synod's youth event, and a sort of hybrid worship service that was mostly what St. James normally does during Advent with some special music added in by the band that played for The Weekend. I didn't have anything to do with planning worship, so I was seeing the bulletin for the first time in the pew on Sunday morning, and I was surprised by a line in their Advent litany: *We are preparing our hearts for the Joy our Redeemer will bring.* I had to look at it a couple times to make sure I was reading it correctly: *We are preparing our hearts for Joy...* It struck me as odd because I don't usually think of joy as something for which I need to prepare. I don't usually expect joy; I'm occasionally surprised by joy. But more often I find myself preparing for the opposite of joy. One of my main pastoral responsibilities is funerals; in the hope of maintaining some composure while I'm leading the service, I have to work through my feelings ahead of time so I come prepared for grief. When I flew home the other week I ended up sitting in an exit row, so I prepared for a plane crash. I keep my AAA membership up to date so that I'm prepared for the car to break down. I've prepared for bad weather, for debilitating surgery, for divorce...the last thing I think to prepare for is joy. Yet, Advent is the season of preparation, and this third Sunday of Advent has traditionally been devoted to joy: *Gaudete* Sunday, from the Latin for *rejoice*, as we read today from Philippians: *Rejoice in the Lord always.* People of faith have long needed the reminder that in the midst of everything else we prepare for in Advent and in life, we are supposed to be *preparing our hearts for the joy our Redeemer will bring.*

At first glance, it would seem that John the Baptist thought as little about preparing for joy as I usually do. *You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* John was never asked to lead a new members' class or train the greeters at his church. Everything about John evokes the Old Testament prophets of old: his wardrobe is weird, his diet is weird, he proclaims God's message not in the Temple, or the king's palace, or the Roman court, but out in the wilderness, on the periphery of Israel's community. And like other prophets before him, he shares a word from God that is good news for the society as a whole, but is also an indictment and a challenge to individuals, especially to those who enjoy comfort, power, or privilege in the society as it is. I had a seminary professor who used to say that the only good prophet is a dead prophet; and we know that eventually John's head did end up on a platter—not for baptizing people or announcing the coming of Jesus, but because he spoke truth to power. John is understandably skeptical of the crowds who enthusiastically seek him out because he knows he's telling them something that many of them won't want to hear.

John instructs the crowds to *bear fruits worthy of repentance*, that is, to show by what they do that they have repented. To *repent* doesn't mean to be sorry for doing something wrong; it's not about feeling guilt or shame. The repentance John calls for is a change of mind, a change of the inner self, a change of direction such that we turn from the way we've been going toward a more godly way of life. I don't know if you've ever tried to get someone to change their mind, especially about a deeply held belief, but people don't generally like to be told that they're wrong and that they should be thinking,

speaking, or acting differently. When John says *bear fruits worthy of repentance*, he's telling the people to trust God's vision for how they should live and, since actions speak louder than words, to *show* their faith in God's way of life by changing what they do.

The crowds ask a very practical question: *What then should we do?* In other words, what do the fruits of repentance, the proof of following God's way, look like in everyday life? John's answers are not rocket surgery: If you're a tax collector, don't pad your own bank account by collecting more taxes than people owe. If you're a soldier, don't threaten anyone or make false arrests just because you can get away with it. If you have twice as much as what you need, instead of hoarding it all for yourself, share with people who don't have enough. You can see why John asks, *Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* John does not expect the corrupt, the powerful, or the wealthy to make these big life changes on their own; he thinks they would only be willing to change if they are anticipating some kind of reckoning.

And John has a point: historically, those who have power and privilege, especially power and privilege through exploitation, don't give it up without a fight. To be clear, John *is* asking for generosity and sacrifice. The tax collectors who have made a comfortable life for themselves by overcharging will have to live a bit more modestly so that others can live at all. The soldiers who are used to taking whatever they want are going to have settle for what is fair instead of what they can get away with taking from others. Those who are wealthy enough to have twice what they can use are going to need to build a bigger table instead of higher fence. You can see why these, and John's many other exhortations, might not have sounded like good news to those he was calling to change.

Yet...imagine what a relief it would have been for the people living under brutal Roman occupation to not have to worry about making ends meet after tax collectors cheated them, to not have to fear the military violating them without cause or accountability, to not have to struggle for adequate shelter or food while others stored up more than they could ever use. And if we can't imagine what that was like in first century Palestine, maybe we could just try to imagine our world without the inequality, injustice, and systemic poverty that still make this very unlike the society that God envisioned when each day of the 40 years in the wilderness, the Lord fed all the people of Israel with the same manna—no less than they needed, but also no more, because what they hoarded spoiled.

Advent calls us to *prepare our hearts for the joy our Redeemer will bring* because if all we have to go on is the world as we see it now, we'll never even imagine the joy that God intends for the *whole* human community—an abundant life where all have a seat at the table, because one would never think to feast while another suffers famine. The fruits of our repentance, our acts that reflect God's abundant love and generous provision, help make this world look more and more like what God intends. And that is how we begin to prepare for the joy that will one day be made complete by the Redeemer who promises to come to us. Get ready, because joy is on the way, thanks be to God.