

12/13/09 Advent 3C

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

"What Shall We Do?" Rev Seth D. Jones

The thing about waiting is it builds up expectations and it creates an atmosphere of impending events.

We try to bend the future into our vision of how we would like things to turn out. If I can just think things through correctly about the future, I might be able to alter said future into something that resembles what I want for everybody involved.

When I was in the corporate world, working in the back offices of major corporations doing various financial things,

I remember waiting to hear about a new job.

As with most careers these days, whatever you do involves changing jobs to several different companies. The days are gone when someone works 35 years at one company. Be that as it may, what results from all that job jumping is a sense of the grass being greener over there.

"They will pay me more at company ABC."

"The benefits are better at corporation X."

"The people are really nice at company TUV."

As I got closer to my start date, I could see my expectations building.

If I was leaving a bad situation, the form of those expectations became what would happen to the company I was leaving.

Even though I was one employee among literally thousands, I had the idea my leaving would somehow impact negatively the whole company.

"If I leave, they will have no one who..."

"If I am not here, what will the management do about...?"

And then I would leave and everything,

much to my great disappointment, would stay exactly the same.

It was as if I had never been there.

This is because most jobs in corporate America, small or large companies, are imminently replaceable.

We put a lot of ourselves into how we build expectations about coming events.

John the Baptist is clearly building expectations about the coming of the one who is more powerful than he is,

who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

It is working, because Luke tells us

"the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah" (3:15).

This is intentional.

John the Baptist wants to build expectations.

Apparently, the crowd is eating it up, too,

even though he has called them *"a brood of vipers!"*

John has called the people to task and has questioned the very foundations of their present faith.

John points to the near future and portrays the coming of the Christ as an act of

judgment

and winnowing forks

and threshing floors -

a time of sorting which will be completed by

"gathering the wheat into the granary"

and the chaff being thrown into the *"unquenchable fire."*

Frightening stuff.

But Luke tells us in verse 18 all this is the proclamation of

"good news to the people."

I am going to do something my Bible teachers told me never to do and that is to presume to know what the character in the story is thinking.

I think John the Baptist sees in the coming of Jesus

the end of time

and the final days of all of history and the earth.

I also think this is the same human error Paul makes as well.

There is the expectation of Jesus

and then there is the reality of the presence of Jesus -

they are not the same thing.

This is why, in Luke 7, John sends messengers from prison to ask Jesus if he is, indeed,

the one we have been waiting for.

For John the Baptist,

the coming of Jesus,

the ministry of Jesus,

sure doesn't look like the conflagration he was expecting.

At the same time, John the Baptist was not wrong.

He is, after all, the Prophet of the Christ.

He continues the long tradition of the other great Prophets of time past.

He is speaking the Word of God.

Somehow, what he says is what happens in the coming of the Christ,

it just doesn't look the way he thought it would.

GK Chesterton has said of reformers,

"The reformer is always right about what is wrong.

They are generally wrong about what is right."

In other words, we must tread carefully when we are seeking to change ourselves, others and the church.

I have always contended, and will continue to contend, as your pastor, that the Bible is not a book of answers.

It is a book which helps us ask better questions about our lives and faith.

If the Bible is not a book of answers,

then we actually have to do a little work when we read it. We have to be willing to read underneath,

around

and through

what is being said to find the truth of the thing spoken.

This is the case in our Gospel reading today.

Three times in John's exhortations to the people,
he is asked the same question:

"What then should we do?"

Last week, we spoke of how John the Baptist prepares the Way for Christ and what we can do to prepare the way as well.

We also spoke of how we are people of the Way.

This week, the question becomes,
what do we do to prepare?

What do we do to get ready for the coming of this powerful person who will change everything?

Now, this is a controversial question, both in John the Baptist's time and in ours.

In John's time, it was controversial because the prevailing belief was:

it is enough to be a child of Abraham,
an inheritor of the promises of Israel.

I need not do anything.

In the time of the Puritans, this whole preparation question led to the controversy with the incredibly intelligent and very forceful Anne Hutchinson of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Anne asserted, with much theological insight and Biblical support, that there is nothing anyone can do to prepare themselves to receive the Holy Spirit.

She would have been appalled at the idea of Advent and Lent, with the implicit suggestion there are things *we* can do to make a space for the Lord God in our lives.

She would have said,

"God does it, not us.

We can never prepare for the coming of the Lord." She was speaking for a strong undercurrent in all Protestant thinking then and today -

namely that anything we do is so tinged with sin and fallen nature we cannot do anything without self-interest and in the full love of Christ,

therefore it is better to do nothing so as not to fall into *"works-righteousness"*, the idea we must do things in order to gain God's favor.

This is called hyper-Calvinism, and Anne Hutchinson was one of the strong proponents of such a position in the early days of Puritan America.

On the surface, this is why she was banished to the theological wasteland of early America -

Rhode Island.

Underneath, it was because she held her own against the best male minds of the day for 48 hours of solid questioning.

The fact of the matter remains, however, to recognize that both John the Baptist and Jesus were asked numerous times, *"What shall we do?"*

The people demand an answer.

What Jesus does for us in relation to the question is flip it all around.

"What shall we do?" in the shadow of the death and resurrection of Jesus is now a question of response to the Great Work of Christ for all of us.

"What shall we do?" is no longer a question of seeking favor of an angry God.

"What shall we do?" is the question we ask together,
as a church,

as a gathering of like-minded people,
which seeks to answer how we respond to the great love God has shown us
in the coming of Jesus Christ.

"What shall we do?" can be answered from three different perspectives, based on our readings for today.

First, we need to repent and return to God.

Second, we need to remember what God has done for us. And third, we need to rejoice.

Again, John the Baptist is right about the underneath nature of what must be done.

John the Baptist is expressing an ethic of justice and the justice of ethics.

But we must see our answer to this question in the light of Christ's love,
which creates an ethic of love
and justice founded in love.

We respond to what has already been done for us.

We are not seeking favor.

In this, at least, I am in full agreement with Anne Hutchinson.

May the Congregationalists forgive me.

First, in light of the coming of Christ, we seek repentance. Repentance has been a recurring theme over the past three weeks and it is because part of waiting for the work of God is making ourselves open and ready to receive whatever it is God is bringing our way.

I have a working understanding of the Bible as the story of how the people of God constantly stray from a life with God, the Son and the Spirit.

It is not the story of how God's people stay with God during thick and thin.

This is what we do:

We wander a circuitous,
unmarked path away from God.

Then we repent,
we return,

we 'turn around' - which is the Greek and the Hebrew meaning of
the word-

to face and seek God.

We do this again and again and again.

Repentance means taking a

clear-headed,

straight,

honest look

at what we have done against God and others

and what we have not done for God and others.

This is what John the Baptist is doing when he calls out the people of Israel,
the tax collectors

and the soldiers in our reading today.

He is taking a straight look at the willingness of the people to rest on their inheritance for their salvation,

thinking it somehow justified them,
when the reality is God can make children of Abraham from the very stones themselves.

Salvation, of course, is up to God, not our ancestry.

John the Baptist is taking an honest look at the state of the poor in the Jordan valley.

He says,

*"You come down to this river wearing your shirt and a jacket,
but over there, he wears only a shirt and is freezing.*

She has a thin sheet to cover her, yet you wear a coat."

Is this not true of today as well?

When we take care of the poor in body and spirit, we return to God.

John takes a straight look at the tax collectors
and tells them they are using others for their own profit
and lying for personal gain.

Couldn't this straight look be applied to the financial companies who have received billions in
tax money but refuse to lend to the people who gave to them?

When we use our resources for the benefit of others, we return to God.

John gives a clear-headed look at the soldiers of the day
and tells them,

*"Yeah, you don't get paid well, but you get paid. Don't take it out on others by threatening
them and by turning against others by accusing them falsely."*

I found out this is where the word *sycophant* comes from, by the way.

Sycophant means "fig shower" - a person who turns in a smuggler of figs for profit.

The word John uses here is the Greek for *sycophant*.

When we do the work we have been given
and do not call out our neighbor for either vanity or profit
and rather praise and honor them, we return to God.

So first, we repent.

We return to God.

Second, in waiting for the Messiah, we remember.

We remember what God has done for us.

In our reading from Zephaniah,

we see God has

"taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies" (3:14).

Is this not what Jesus has done in his death and resurrection?

Do we remember?

We remember the comfort and help God has given us.

We remember not just as individuals,

but as a gathered people.

What has God done for us as a people?

As the worshipping,

covenanted body of those who seek faith and a life with God,

Do we remember?

Remembering takes work.

It takes honest reflection with others so we might discern more clearly the presence of God in our
midst.

Remembering means

"to put something back together again",

to *"make something whole".*

The word related to 'remembering' is "religion",
which is where we get the word "ligament" from.

To "religion" is to *"bring the body together again."*

Do we remember?

So second, we remember.

We remember the work of God and Christ for us.

And third, in the knowledge that God fulfills God's promises, we rejoice.

We rejoice because, according to Zephaniah,

the Lord rejoices *"over you with gladness"* and *"will renew you in God's love"* (3:17b).

Knowing God rejoices over us and renews us,

we no longer need to fear disaster.

We no longer need to fear anything at all.

Then, we begin to get a small glimpse of what the world looks like from Christ's perspective.

Then, when we rejoice in the work of the Lord,

we begin to do the things the Lord has done.

In Zephaniah, we can see what some of those things are:

God deals with those who oppress.

Therefore, we become people who joyfully confront oppression and tyranny wherever we encounter it.

God saves the lame.

Therefore, we become people who joyfully help those who are not able to help themselves.

God does not shame those who have suffered.

God changes shame into praise.

Therefore, we joyfully seek out ways to praise those who are sunk into their shame and guilt.

As Paul says, we seek always to build up one another, not to tear them down.

God brings the lost home.

Therefore we joyfully seek ways of being a companion to those who have lost their way -

in faith,

in family,

in church,

in friendship.

God restores the fortunes of those who have lost all they have.

Therefore, we joyfully seek ways of restoring shelter, food, stability and relationships to those who have lost them in whatever way they have lost them.

In answering the question,

"What shall we do?"

we must recognize we are working against our fallen human nature.

These are things we do against the normal grain.

It is not comfortable.

There is a purifying aspect to repentance, remembering and rejoicing and it is this purifying aspect,

 this fire of the Spirit,

 which tells us what John the Baptist says is in fact true.

But it doesn't look like what we thought it might.

 When we are baptized in the Spirit,

 we become seekers of what God has already given us -

 the great love of God and Christ which is known only by living it out

 by repenting, remembering and rejoicing

 in hope, peace, joy and love.

Amen.