

## WHAT THEN SHOULD WE DO?

*the Rev. Dr. DeWayne L. Davis*

*December 12, 2021, Third Sunday in Advent*

*Lead Minister*

**Text: Luke 3:7–18**

When John the son of Zechariah (or John the Baptist, as he is famously known) went out into the wilderness to proclaim a baptism of repentance, the evangelist of the Gospel of Luke likened him to the prophet Isaiah, whom God commissioned to announce Israel's liberation and their promised return from exile. So, in Luke's telling, John was like that voice crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord and anticipating the arrival of the salvation of God. So, the people came.

They showed up for that most ancient, meaningful ritual and sacrament of faith—baptism. From all walks of life they gathered, demonstrating their intention to make that affirmative commitment to align themselves with God at the urging of the prophet. Now, I assure you most religious leaders would have counted this mass gathering of people to be baptized as a welcomed, positive development. Yet, John greets them with the invective, “You brood of vipers,” dismissing any claims they may have to religious tradition or heritage. He demands that they show their allegiance to God, not just through the ritual of baptism, but in their actions. This demonstration of their intention through baptism, this act of repentance, must be confirmed by their actions. Thus, he exhorts them bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Now, I make no defense of John's approach, only to say we should expect and accept that prophets are just iconoclastic outcasts who have never stood on ceremony in their urgent utterances of what thus says the Lord. And if we spend our time policing John's tone, we are likely to miss a most powerful message, especially during this season of Advent. Look past the rudeness, look beyond the apocalyptic language, we can see John laying out what life looks like for those watching and waiting for God's movement, those who live in joyful anticipation of God's promised liberation.

Place too much focus on John's strangeness, his insults and uncompromising word of destruction, and his vivid images of the swinging ax and unquenchable fire, and we may not see the experience and response of those who came out to hear John's message. Depending on the where we fall ideologically in our faith, we may assume that the main takeaway from this text is all about judgment or social justice or the promise of God's return. But I want us to linger with John's hearers, those very people who came out into the wilderness to be baptized, whom John referred to as a brood of vipers. They saw all of it. They wrestled with the judgment, the call to serve, and the good news of God's return. Notice, they were not filled with dread. They did not take umbrage at John's tone and rudeness. They did not object by justifying themselves or even debating the theological efficacy of their baptism.

No, the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers who came for baptism and received a hard saying from God's prophet humbly responded with a question: “What then should we do?” With that question, they begin their journey of discovery . . . of what it means to truly repent. And as tough as John is, his invitation to them is about taking a journey to becoming faithful people who bear the fruit of those who are aligned with God. He does not tell them God's goal is for the world's destruction. He does not tell them to give up on the world in preparation for Armageddon. He does not tell them to assume the posture of judge. He tells them to care for the poor and the vulnerable. He tells them to share their abundance; clothe and feed

people; don't exploit and mistreat people out of greed; do not harm, threaten, or falsely accuse people. This is what they should they do: Live lives that reflect their allegiance to God and God's dream for the world. That's what is called for in anticipation of God's promise to do a new thing—bearing fruit worthy of repentance; showing, not just telling. And Luke tells us the people's response to John was they were filled with expectation—not fear, foreboding, nor pessimism . . . expectation. Sounds like Advent, doesn't it? In fact, their hearts were so moved and so open that they began to wonder if John might be the Messiah. This whole encounter was tough, honest, and clarifying, and it was good news.

Over the last several years, especially within the last year and half since George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis, when I give sermons, speeches, and lectures on racism, police accountability, and social justice and social transformation, I am almost always greeted with the question, "What then should we do?" Often, those who ask that question are not prepared for the answer. Some take umbrage or seek to justify themselves, protesting how good they are. I worry that sometimes we don't understand what it may mean for us to truly bear fruit worthy of repentance. Because that question, "What then should we do?" is the beginning of the journey, an acceptance that more is expected of us beyond ritual, our intentions, or our identities. And most often, the answers to that question will not include how to act in ways that benefit us personally or materially. The answers to the question will have to be about caring for others, sharing abundance, clothing and feeding the vulnerable, and doing no harm. The answers are found in looking out and away from ourselves to the needs of others. The answers will have to do with acting to embody an alternative order to the world's business as usual. How are we going to bear witness with our lives to a different set of values, practices, and aspirations that reflect our allegiance to a God who has promised liberation?

If we are sincere in our response to the prophetic call to repent in anticipation of the new thing God is going to do, we also have to accept what John's hearers appear to have learned after their encounter with him: Liberation is not guaranteed by ritual; justice is not done because of our good intentions. The journey to liberation, the promise of God's redemption, begins with judgment. The world has been judged. It is violent, oppressive, exploitative, and dehumanizing. The world has not honored God's beloved good creation.

John's prophecy contains both judgment and invitation. Just as he did with those who came out into the wilderness to hear his preaching, John invites us to come out of this world, if not physically, certainly spiritually and ideologically. Come out from under the existing structures of injustice and live under God's promise of liberation. We understand that it is not enough to hide behind our rituals or to be known as good or a Christian or any other identity if we do not live the commitment we have made to God. What then should we do? We hasten the arrival of God's justice and liberation by embodying it now. We should care and concern for others. We refrain from hurting God's beloved with our greed, neglect, violence, and exploitation. We live lives that reflect our allegiance to God and God's dream for the world.