

“Do The Good That Is Yours To Do”
Luke 3:7-16
The Third Sunday of Advent
December 15, 2024
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Luke 3:7-16 (NRSVUE)

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the crowds asked him, “What, then, should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

What if a hundred rose-breasted grosbeaks
flew in circles around your head? What if
the mockingbird came into the house with you and
became your advisor? What if
the bees filled your walls with honey and all
you needed to do was ask them and they would fill
the bowl? What if the brook slid downhill just
past your bedroom window so you could listen
to its slow prayers as you fell asleep? What if
the stars began to shout their names, or to run
this way and that way above the clouds? What if
you painted a picture of a tree, and the leaves
began to rustle, and a bird cheerfully sang
from its painted branches? What if you suddenly saw
that the silver of water was brighter than the silver
of money? What if you finally saw

that the sunflowers, turning toward the sun all day
and every day – who knows how, but they do it – were
more precious, more meaningful than gold?¹

In this poem, entitled, *How Would You Live Then?*, Mary Oliver calls us to consider what it would take for a reorientation of our lives to happen. What if something we saw or heard or felt caused us to modify, if not abandon, how we had been living in order to open us to some greater wonder, greater joy, greater purpose?

I wonder if you have ever experienced something that changed your perspective on life? That changed how you lived every day, for the better?

In the winter and spring of 2015, I was going through a tough time. I was anxious about the next steps in my life. I'd just ended a difficult relationship. I felt lonely and lost...and depressed.

At the time I lived about 3 blocks from Vanderbilt Divinity School, in Nashville, Tennessee. I learned that the Episcopal priest, professor and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor would be speaking in the Chapel as part of her tour for her new book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*.

But as the night for her visit drew near, I didn't have much motivation to attend her talk. I was too tired, too busy, too sad, to people-weary to leave my cozy blanket by the fireplace. The evening was dark, and rainy and windy, and the air just felt heavy, and it did not feel good to be outside. I felt I didn't have it in me to go.

But a friend called and said, I'll walk over to the Chapel with you. And so, not wanting to let my friend down, I went with him.

And that evening changed me. The effort to leave my comfort zone was just what I had needed, because I needed to hear Barbara Brown Taylor's message: do not be afraid of the dark and all that is in it. God is there, too. In fact, the dark is where God's done Their best work: the dark of the womb and the dark of the tomb.

I left changed. I felt as if I had experienced a reorientation towards life, gained a new perspective that helped me move forward.

I wonder if the crowds around John the Baptist felt that way.

These people gathered around him had joined him in the wilderness: left their homes, the places where they were comfortable, and traveled into a place known in stories as an uncertain and liminal space, a wild edge where transformation is risked.

John's words were not comforting that day. In fact, the portrayal of John in the gospel of Luke squarely situates him in the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible—crying out for justice from the margins for those on the margins, not acting for his own aggrandizement but pointing the way to something else, something greater.

¹ Mary Oliver 'Blue Iris: Poems and Essays' Penguin Random House, 2006

Audrey West writes in one commentary, “John’s first words in Luke sound harsh to modern ears, but they make clear John’s place within the Jewish prophetic tradition. His mission is to warn the crowds of the consequences of their current path and call them back to the ways of God (see also Jeremiah 1:9-10). John cautions against abusing the privilege of a family tree that has a long prior relationship with God: “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor.’” If any think that ancestry, ethnicity, place of origin, language or any other status-marker or identity—including, today, within the church or outside of it—allows them to lord it over others or lets them off the hook, John severs those notions at their root. Indeed, if the [family] tree does not produce good fruit—if the community does not live in such a way that its life illustrates its relationship with God—it might as well, metaphorically, be kindling for a bonfire (Luke 3:9).”²

Throughout the Bible, and honestly, in our own time, we may notice that there are few prophets who are welcomed by the people to whom they speak. Prophets’ words are often harsh, pointed, plainly telling the truth that many choose not to listen to, offering warnings that many choose not to heed. John the Baptist, a puzzling figure because of his description as wearing camel hair clothes and living off of honey and locusts, was one such prophet. He was an odd guy, living in the wilderness, telling people their heritage doesn’t necessarily matter and that if they rest on their laurels instead of living in pursuit of God’s justice...they weren’t going to be happy with the outcome, in this world or whatever came next.

Remember that John ended up with his head on a platter in front of those in power.

But we can’t deny that there was something special going on in that crowd around John that day by the river. The people were longing for something, evident in the questions they asked.

The crowd asked, how are we to live? John answers, share your belongings with your neighbors. Tax collectors asked, how are we to live? John answers, do your job and don’t skim off the top to pad your pockets. Soldiers asked, how are we to live? John answers, accept only the compensation that is due you and serve your community respectfully.

The crowd gathered on the banks of the Jordan, leaning in towards John so they might gain understanding of his confusing metaphorical teachings...they wanted to know what to do to live well, to be righteous. They wanted to be told what to do. And John, the prophet, was pointing the way, helping them find their way.

That’s such a natural desire: to want to be told what to do. Especially for people who are often in control or making decisions, or people who are deeply concerned about being good and right, sometimes they/we just want to be told what to do. And in times when the world seems extra complicated or extra scary, when the stakes seem especially high, it is natural to want to be told what to do. It is natural to want to say, “Just tell me the way I should go and I will do it.”

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-37-18-5>

That's where prophets like John come in. And, while we're at it, the whole cast of Christmas pageants are made up of characters who, like John, point the way for us: the prophets, the angels, the shepherds, the stars, and, even after a little while, the magi. How each of these points the way towards God's love and justice revealed in a tiny baby differs greatly, but all are saying the same thing: "Wait. Watch. Pay attention. Something important, something earth-shaking, someone who will change everything is coming soon."

How, then, shall we live?

The question is as relevant now as it was two thousand years ago. People have been asking this question throughout history, across time and space and language and religion. Knowing what we know about the world, about ourselves, about what is asked of us: what do we do now. How, then, shall we live?

And we, sitting here in Seattle First Baptist Church in 2024, 10 days away from Christmas, in a time rife with political uncertainty and ideological grief all around us...how are we to live?

I think John would say, as he said two thousand years ago: do the good that is yours to do. No more, no less. Do what is required of you. Each of you have your part, no one can stand in for anyone else. Contribute to the common wellbeing in the ways that you are uniquely equipped to do so.

And when we think: what can I, what can we, do? Spiritual teacher Frederick Buechner says: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

What is that place for you?

Perhaps you write letters to your lawmakers. Talk to neighbors who put out different political signs than you do. Donate money to an organization that helps people with less privilege than you have. Volunteer your time feeding people. Support popular education, helping neighbors understand their rights. Create art. Sing about justice. Care for children.

But whatever you do, remember that you are not alone. World peace is not dependent on only you, or only us in this room (and thank goodness it's not!) But perhaps all of us can help hasten peace a bit as we and others do the work our souls must have in our own corners.

You may have heard these wise words from Rabbi Rami Shapiro that resonate with me in these uncertain times in which we live, taking after the prophet Micah: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

That's what John reminded the people that day. They had chosen to leave their homes, chosen to venture into the wilderness, chosen to listen to a message that was hard to hear but that had the potential to reorient their lives...if they chose to enact what they heard.

Again, Audrey West writes: "It is good to be reminded that John's message is meant for a people who wait with eager longing for a Savior, then and now. If those who came to see John are called

snakes, so are we. If they cannot claim special privilege based on their heritage, neither can we. If they risk cutting themselves off from God, if the ax is ready to fall on them ... so it is on us. John the Baptist's mission in the wilderness is to call God's people to repentance and to show what that looks like. However, neither his preaching nor the baptism he offers can actually empower lives to be changed. If John's message were the end of the story, the people would leave the wilderness with little more than a story to tell and a to-do list that cannot sustain them in a life lived fully before God."³

Though it is natural to want to be told how to live your life, particularly when it is hard and you are anxious and the world gets more and more complex each day...a list of check-boxes is not going to cut it. To the crowd and the tax collectors and the soldiers, John offered guidance, but it was not in discrete tasks but rather in a reorientation to their ways of being in the world. Reorientation is part of the definition of "repent" if we go back to the Greek "metanoia": change and do differently. And this "differently" that the crowds then, and us now, are pursuing, is possible when we follow the Way of Jesus.

What if you left your home, following an instinct and accepting an invitation, and heard words that changed your life?

What if you asked "how are you?" to people and actually meant it? And then listened and let their stories change you?

What if you paid attention to the wisdom of children, allowing their perspective on the world to motivate your care for the next generations?

What if you met the eyes of every person living outside and treated them as your neighbors?
What if you shared your lunch with someone sitting on a bus stop bench?

What if you learned from elephants and conducted a circle of care around elders and the most vulnerable?

What if you picked up trash on the sidewalk every time you saw it? What if you made art from things others had thrown away?

What if you joined the protest that marched past your car, though you were late to work? What if you supported mutual aid funds?

What if you spent your money with a clean conscience, divesting from corporations that profit from war and exploitation? What if you followed the squirrel's example and shared your abundance with your neighbor, so that no one would go hungry this winter?

What if you found your place and your people, and did your work side-by-side, holding one another up and accepting support, doing justice and loving mercy and walking humbly now?
What if you did the good that is yours to do?

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-37-18-5>

How, then, shall we live?

This advent, let us begin with hope. Let us begin with peace. Let us begin with joy. Let us begin with love.

May it ever be so. Amen.