

The Annoying, Obnoxious, Wonderful, Good News of God

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Advent 3 - Gaudete Sunday - December 13, 2009

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. 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; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is 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 thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Peter Cartwright was an American Methodist preacher in the earliest days of the Methodist movement. Born in Amherst County, Virginia, he lived in Kentucky before his family settled in Illinois and served congregations in Kentucky and Tennessee. He was a veteran of the War of 1812 who ran for a seat in congress in 1846, only to lose to Abraham Lincoln. Ordained in 1802 by Francis Asbury, he was an abolitionist, a founding member of the Illinois Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, and elected to 13 General Conferences. He worked tirelessly for the promotion of higher education, helping to found McKendree College, MacMurray College, and Illinois Wesleyan University.¹

Cartwright was also known as a powerful, courageous, and dynamic preacher. One Sunday when he was about to preach, he was told that United States President

¹ "Peter Cartwright," in *Wikipedia*.

Andrew Jackson was in attendance, and he was warned to not say anything out of line, so when he stood to preach, he said, “I understand that Andrew Jackson is here. I have been requested to be guarded in my remarks. Andrew Jackson will go to hell if he doesn’t repent.”²

Today is Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete* comes from a Latin word translated “rejoice.” Since Advent, like Lent, was traditionally a penitential season in preparation for Christmas, Gaudete Sunday was intended to shift the focus from self-examination to celebration of the nearness of the Lord’s coming. The brightness of the pink candle is used in the Advent wreath on Gaudete Sunday is to remind us of the brightness of the coming star of Christ, the light who shines in the darkness, reminds us to rejoice!

As I have said in the past, the Scripture readings which are used each week by all churches that follow the Revised Common Lectionary all have something in common. Sometimes this is fairly obvious and sometimes it is not. This week, the common theme in all the texts seems quite clear, that is, until we arrive at this reading from Luke. It is like the old Sesame Street game where we have to pick the one thing which does not belong. **To show you what I mean, let’s review the first sentence of this morning’s Scriptures:**

Zephaniah: *Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O Daughter Jerusalem!*

Isaiah: *Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.*

Philippians: *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*

Luke: *John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”*

John the Baptist kind of sticks out, doesn’t he? There does not seem to be much of the Gaudete Sunday rejoicing here, does there?

In this morning’s text, we again encounter John the Baptist, who is found in the wilderness, preaching a message of repentance to his listeners. We don’t know much about John; most of what we do know comes from Luke’s gospel. We know that he was a cousin of Jesus’ who was possibly born of priestly parentage. Luke 1:5 tells us that “In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to

² Larson, Craig Brian, ed., *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993, p. 42.

the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.” Zechariah and Elizabeth were the parents of John the Baptist.

We do not know if John was ever a priest, or if he was even expected to become a priest. Regardless, he wound up leaving everything behind and living an ascetic life in the Judean wilderness, wearing camel hair and a leather belt, the garb of the prophet, and subsisting on locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:6). His message was one calling people to abandon all notions that the mere *practice* of religion or one’s ancestry being enough to satisfy the demands on the people of God.³ John’s message was a message of changed hearts shown in changed lives, shown in the day to day choices that people made.

If we examine the questions asked of John in this morning’s text, as well we can gain insight into the core of John’s message. John’s audience is simply described as “the crowds,” but we are told that the crowds include tax collectors and soldiers, both of whom want to know what this new message means for their respective vocations. John’s answer? Be fair and do not cheat or extort anyone. Be satisfied with what you have, because if you are not, you are going to be tempted to do wrong. He insists that the crowd share what they have with the poor. Those with two coats *must* give one away. Those with food *must* give some away.

From this little sermon by John the Baptist, we learn in a very compressed yet passionate way the kind of things that will be important to Jesus in his quickly arriving ministry: our faith, our lifestyles, how we relate to our possessions, how we relate to our neighbors, and how we treat the poor amongst us.

John’s message is that if we want to be on the right side of God, then how our faith affects our life matters. He finds uninteresting our modern notions of faith and doubt. John is not concerned in this text with atheism, secular humanism, agnosticism, or the science-versus-religion debate. Who John is talking to here are those who say they believe in God, who say they are seeking God’s will, yet who from time to time fail to act like it in their daily lives. John teaches us that our outward behavior and our outward choices reflect our inward convictions, and we are to embody this new age that is dawning in this world with the coming of the Messiah. If we are to claim the new life he is bringing to us and to this world through those who seek him, then a superficial cleaning isn’t enough. We must look more deeply at ourselves, our lives, our choices, and others. There is more to being kingdom people than keeping up appearances.

In other words, this is an annoying, obnoxious message.

Honestly, each time I read this text, I am struck by fact that people actually *want* to hear this message. In my experience, people often choose churches on the basis of what place will afford them the least chance of hearing a message like this one. I’m not too keen on being yelled at and having my flaws and the things for which I need to repent

³ “John the Baptist” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, New York, 1993, p. 372-373.

called out, and I suspect you are the same way. I do not like name calling, and I try to be the kind of preacher who gives guilt a very wide berth.

Yet here we are. On the third Sunday of Advent, on Gaudete Sunday, on the rejoicing Sunday, being called a “brood of vipers” by John the Baptist, and yet Luke’s gospel tells us that *crowds* of people came to hear this message, so there must be a reason that we must leave *our* homes and *our* towns and hear what he has to say to *us*.

When I was in the seventh grade, I was put into a math class that was far too easy for me.⁴ So, after a few weeks, my teacher had my guidance counselor put me in a more challenging class. For about a month, I had a standing lunchtime appointment with my guidance counselor attempting to convince her that she was wrong, and that I needed to go back to the first class. Didn’t she want me to get good grades?

When I was on middle and high school football teams, the coaches did not speak to the players as my little league baseball coaches had. There was no talk of “just do your best” and “winning isn’t everything.” Winning, I quickly learned, pretty much was everything, something we would do regularly if my teammates and I would only learn to Be Aggressive, Hustle, Work Harder, Not Cut Corners, Be Brave, Work Together, Pay Attention, and generally Care More. So great was their belief that these virtues should be second nature, that they would yell at us and make us run.

When I was in my first pastoral appointment, a man named Don Connor, a retired Colonel in the United States Army, who was a kindhearted, generous senior citizen who was our church’s Lay Leader, once told me in a Bible study that when he was in boot camp, he used to fall asleep each night, fantasizing about all the different ways he was planning on killing his drill instructor. It was amazing and a little disturbing: our Lay Leader talking openly about premeditating murder.

Which takes us back to this morning’s text: John’s message is much less about how it makes us feel than it is about how those passionate, firey words of John’s reflect God’s intentions for our lives; about how God’s concern for our physical, emotional, and spiritual lives is a concern filled with great urgency, and how John’s message is one of great concern for the outcome of the rest of our lives, much moreso than simply identifying our failings in the present.

My guidance counselor wanted me to learn arithmetic, which her experience taught her would not happen in a class where I already knew all the answers.

Our coaches wanted us to win, but they also wanted us to learn the disciplines of hard work, self-sacrifice, and teamwork, virtues we never would have learned in an environment where our coaches were content to allow us to spend all of our time together spinning in our own orbits.

⁴ As impossible as it is to believe that such a class ever existed...

My former Lay Leader said the fantasies of killing his drill instructor ended on his first day in combat, when he discovered that in basic training, his drill instructor was simply trying to save his life.

After Peter Cartwright proclaimed that unless his President repented, he would go to hell, the congregation was shocked, and wondered how President Jackson would respond. After the service, he approached Cartwright, shook his hand, and said, “Sir, if I had a regiment of men like you, I could whip the world.”⁵

The third Sunday of Advent is called Gaudette Sunday. Gaudette is a word that means “rejoice.” Perhaps our reason for rejoicing this day is because our God is a God who loves us enough to tell us the truth, that our God is at once the creator of the universe yet incarnate enough that our lives, our priorities, our deeds, and the needs of those less fortunate than us *really matter*, and perhaps our reason for rejoicing today is because we have a faith that teaches us that regardless of what we may believe about ourselves, our God believes that our best days are still the ones we have not yet seen.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.

⁵ Larsen, p. 42.