

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta, GA  
Advent III in Year B, December 12, 2021  
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Today's Gospel finds John the Baptist preaching repentance. His preaching rant is composed of three points and, oddly, a concluding poem.

*Point 1:* The Eschatological warnings. Watch out! The end time is coming ...

*Point 2:* The Ethical exhortations. Here is what you should do ...

*Point 3:* The Messianic expectation. He who comes after me will baptize with the Holy Spirit ...

And then *the poem*...but wait...the poem is from the pen of Luke, not the mouth of John. Luke writes: All of the above is "good news".

We hear John's speaking style as gruff and blunt, even insulting. He issues a call for a baptism of repentance. The crowds come out to be baptized, they are eager for a fresh start, but then look what John does. He calls them a brood of vipers. Baby snakes. He reminds them that they are descendants of Adam and Eve who followed the temptations of that serpent and that they are no different. As snakes in the grass, so to speak,

they can no longer rely on what their faithful ancestors did. Nor can they rely on John's baptism of them in the river. If they are repentant, if they have undergone a change of mind, a change in how they live, then that must appear obvious in their behavior. In New Testament Greek, the word for repentance is metanoia, which means literally a change of mind, a change in direction, that determines how one lives. John reminds them: Just as the owner of an orchard expects the trees to bear fruit, so they also are expected to produce fruit, the glorious fruits of repentance.

What John says ignites a response in those who hear him and so they ask the obvious question, "What then must we do?" Three groups ask this question, and each group gets a rather unique answer. Let's start with the tax collectors. In those days, tax collectors could force people to pay not only the basic tax, but a surcharge that went into the tax collectors' pockets. The second group was the soldiers. Soldiers could extort protection money from people by threat or even false accusations. We expect tax collectors to repent by not gouging people and collecting only the amount required. We expect soldiers to repent by not extorting people, threatening them, or falsely accusing them.

John also gives repentance an unexpected spin when he addresses the third group, literally the rest of the crowd, most of them very poor. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.” A common human propensity is to stock up on stuff to provide for security in the future. Luke, however, believes that the new world is coming soon. When you pass along your second coat, you turn away from protecting yourself and turn towards the new world in which God cares for all. You show a sign of trust that this new world is coming and that God will provide for you as you provide for others.

Otherwise, John’s message is standard prophetic fare, material that one would anticipate from any prophet worthy of the name. Regarding eschatological warning: judgment is near, and that judgment will not be determined on the basis of religious, cultural, or ethnic identity but rather on the conduct of one’s life. Regarding messianic expectation: one who is greater and who baptizes not with water but with the Holy Spirit is coming, and his coming will initiate that eschatological judgment. In

both of these regards, John stands as the latest and the last in a long line of Israel's prophets.

There is a lot of hellfire and brimstone in John's preaching. Not everyone today, myself included, believes that there will be such a single, dramatic moment of judgment, suddenly at the end of some age. Nor does everyone today believe in a punishment of unquenchable fire where people wail and gnash their teeth. But buried deep at the center of John's preaching is a conviction that is as true today as when John spoke it: Our attitudes and behaviors bear consequences. If we go along with dishonesty, injustice, exploitation, violence, and utter selfhood, we can expect our personal lives, and our social worlds to be stained by the same.

There are opportunities to do God's will, to be God's people, all around us and these acts do not have to be "heroic". These opportunities are shaped by our context: the roles in which we find ourselves and the needs of the neighbor with whom we are confronted. These opportunities abound all around us.

Finally, most peculiar still, perhaps, is the “eschatological location” of the good fruits. Tax collectors are not called to sever their relationship with Rome, nor are the soldiers exhorted to lives of pacifism. Even in light of impending eschatological judgment, they are called to serve where they are; to take their stand for neighbor amid, rather than apart from the turbulence and trouble of the present age; and to do good because, rather than in spite of, their compromised positions. By sandwiching such ordinary instruction amid eschatological warning and messianic expectation, Luke’s John hallows the mundane elements of daily life.

Caught between eschatological judgment and messianic consummation, the crowds hear John speak of a role in the coming kingdom they can play. It demands neither renunciation nor asceticism, neither pilgrimage nor sacrifice. It is, in short, entirely within their reach: “Share. Be fair. Don’t bully.”

And then the concluding poem:

“So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people.”