

Sermon: Luke 3:8-17
"Stories of Justice"

© Kate Heichler; Preached at Christ Church Wayside/La Plata
Advent 4, Year C, Sunday, December 19, 2021

*Come, thou long expected Jesus, come in Spirit, come in Truth;
come in Word, come in Bread and Wine; Come now, we pray. Amen.*

We could use us some John the Baptist right about now, right?
Someone calling us back to the values we claim to believe.
Someone telling people to stop being so selfish they'll put the whole population
at risk of a deadly disease; to stop being so hateful to each other;
to tell those who have way more than they need
to share their coats and income with those who have less,
to tell those trying to disenfranchise underprivileged voters to cut it out...
Where would John begin if he was wandering our streets and shopping centers?

For two weeks every December the church invites John the Baptist to roam
the wilderness of our lives – our kitchens, offices, roadways, our domesticated
religion – to remind us about our sins, and greed and humility and justice,
and repentance, which means turning our lives to God.

American Christianity often focuses on personal sin –
chiefly what we do with our bodies. There is much less emphasis on how
we think and talk, though Jesus clearly defined those as capital sins.
There is very little emphasis on societal sin, how we wield power
and hoard money and resources, resist leveling our playing fields.
But when John the Baptist, whose call to repentance was bringing people
out of the city in droves, whose invitation to return to the life of God
was so compelling they were flocking into that river for a ritual cleansing;
when people asked how they were meant to alter their lives in response
to this repentance, he did not talk about sexuality or crime.
He talked about greed and abuse of power.
He talked about society-level sin – and friends, we're all complicit in that.

It is said of preachers, and prophets, that their job is to
"comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable."
That's the path John the Baptist forged. John's mission, remember,
was to "make ready a people prepared for their Lord."
Prepare ye the way of the Lord! he called. People, get ready! Repent!
That's what John was all about. That's what Advent is about, preparing.

Now, there must have been something really amazing about the Baptist, that he drew such crowds despite such a harsh message. Some took it to heart, asking, “What can I do?” And he had some really specific suggestions for them: You got two coats? share with someone who has none. You got extra food? Do likewise. He tells the tax collectors to collect no more than is actually due them. Since they made their living by over-taxing and keeping the profits, this amounted to a radical change in business practice. He told soldiers who were abusing their power to extort money from people, to stop it, and actually be satisfied with their wages. In other words, when John said to people, “Being sorry isn’t enough – your lives actually have to bear some good fruit,” and when they said, “How?” his answers were all about greed and justice.

We could use us some John the Baptist right about now, but do we want to hear what he has to say? John spoke directly to the human tendency to hoard wealth and to abuse power – and he offered the antidote, which is trusting God and giving ourselves away. Bearing fruit worthy of repentance means caring that resources are distributed equally, giving of our plenty to those who have less. Being content with what we have. Being ethical in our business dealings. Wielding power wisely and humbly – that’s bearing fruit worthy of repentance.

Bearing fruit worthy of repentance means living your life in such a way that people can tell it’s different. You know that old saw – if you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? That means change of heart, not just adjusting behavior. And it means caring about justice for all – for all – more than caring for ourselves.

We are called to be active in God’s mission, and God’s mission always includes justice. That’s not an add-on, a nice-to-have. Being involved in the work of justice is stressful, painful, sometimes dangerous; It certainly was dangerous for John the Baptist, for Jesus, for Gandhi, for Martin Luther King, Jr. to name some obvious folks. We go two steps forward and one step back. It often feels like an uphill battle. I spend more time on church things rather than on justice issues – more gratifying by far. A scan of the news is enough to make me say, “Why bother? There is no justice.” But that just means I’m going about it wrong.

Being active in God's mission is not meant to be frustrating.

If there's more fatigue and frustration than joy and energy, that may just be a sign that we're trying to do it on our own steam, our own strength.

God's justice is just that: God's. We are to work for justice – but not alone.

We are to work with God for justice, and that means the outcome is already set.

The more we work, the sooner we get to see it, but God has declared

that the day of justice will come, and all that is wrong will be made right,

and all that has been taken will be restored,

and all who have been hurt and killed and stolen from will be made whole.

That outcome is already accomplished in God's sight;

we just help the world live into that future God has already achieved in Christ.

We work for justice with God, not for God, with the Spirit, not on our own.

John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit – from before birth – remember the way he belly-flopped in Elizabeth when the pregnant Mary entered the room?

The Angel Gabriel had told his father that he would work

“In the spirit and power of Elijah, to bring many back to the Lord.”

John's commitment to justice ultimately got him killed,

but his energy to proclaim the coming of God's Messiah never flagged.

He pursued justice in the power of the Holy Spirit; so can we.

If we feel anxious about the state of the world and the injustice around us,

God has an antidote for us: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God, and the peace of Christ will guard your hearts and your thoughts.*

That's what we do with our anxiety – bring it to the God who is near,

let the peace and power and passion of Christ drive us on.

What stories of justice achieved draw you forward? Tell them!

Maybe you've marched for change, helped push for legislation to be passed.

Maybe you've started initiatives that made space for justice to be done.

I've often organized prayer vigils and events that got people together to protest injustice or push for change; small effort but a catalyst.

What injustice do you wish you could set right?

Maybe there are others here who share that passion.

What stirrings of the Spirit are driving you these days?

People, get ready! Soon and very soon, Emmanuel, God with us.

Through us his justice is already breaking in. Are you ready? *Amen*

Luke 3:3-7-18

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? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."

Tax collectors also came to be baptized.

"Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

"Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied,

"Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.