

“What Should We Do and Hope For?” CHC 12-13-15

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Luke 3:7-18

Some years ago I was pastoral leadership for a group of seventeen persons from my former church, traveling three weeks in Egypt, Jordan, and Israel. One of the most memorable moments for me was standing in the waters of the Jordan where it was said John stood, receiving those who came to him to repent and be baptized.

All from my church lined up for me to baptize them in the Jordan River. It was a memorable event in their lives, one which I entered into as well.

After I had completed baptizing each person and was ready to leave, other persons started coming toward me asking to be baptized. I wasn't prepared for that. All were there from other countries, many Catholic, asking me to baptize them. It was late afternoon and I was the only preacher standing in the waters of the Jordan. I couldn't very well say I don't have Session approval. It was one of those spontaneous moments where I felt the Spirit of God saying go with it. Their emotions reflected the deep spiritual impact that was transpiring.

Everybody is flocking to John, including the religious leaders. There is a sense in the air that God's Spirit is up to something. It has been a long time since an anointed prophet of God was believed to be around, several hundred years to be exact. John is manifesting that kind of authority and presence, so it is not surprising that the religious leaders would be in the crowd checking John out. After all, people were flocking to him from all over to hear a word from God. His father Zechariah prophesied of John in Luke 1:76-77 this word from the Holy Spirit; “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins”.

It is truly Advent for that Jewish community. Anticipation is running high. People hunger for an authentic experience of God. The recent terrorist act in Paris, killing 152 and wounding 352, moved people to seek God. At the American Church in Paris, on the city's Left Bank, multitudes of Americans crowded the pews as well as tourists. The Sunday after the attacks, churches whose pews are normally empty, were filled to capacity. Only one Christian man, named Nana Sumah and a member of the congregation, knew the words of a hymn which he loudly sang without any apparent self-consciousness.

He said, “I am a believer, so my religion gives me hope. But many nonbelievers are here today to also find light” (‘The Christian Century’, December 9, 2015, p.15).

The people flocking to John are seeking light. When John sees the crowd, part of it comprised of the religious leaders not known for their integrity or commitment to the common people, he blurts out, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” His question is inclusive of all. That no doubt initiated much discussion and perhaps, self- reflection. Some might have thought, “Why

am I included? I'm already a child of Abraham!" Others are ready to listen and take in the message God has put on John's heart to preach.

To understand the peoples' feeling toward the religious leaders, we go back to the early days of Jesus' ministry. On the Sabbath Jesus would enter the synagogues and teach. Mark tells us that the people "were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes" (Mark 1:22).

What John saw among the community was a disparity between life and faith profession. Someone might say, "I am a Christian. I was baptized as an infant. I was born one! How dare you assume I am not a Christian?" A congregant I visited when pastoring the First Presbyterian Church of Bellingham, Washington, expressed his feelings about a prominent elder in the church. He stated, "How is that man a Christian and an elder? He cheats people in his business dealing and is unethical". I asked him what evidence he had to say that. He then offered a litany of examples from his experience.

John preaches, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance". And by the way, "Don't bank on the fact that you are a child of Abraham if you don't act like one". In John's words, "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 of Abraham'".

There is a judgment upon our character, particularly when our character diverges from our faith identity and profession. So what is at stake for John's crowd" is not a paternity test by which one proves that Abraham is one's blood ancestor, but a test of character and behavior consistent with that of Abraham" (Interpreters Bible, p.1858). As those of us who profess Christ this is no less true. Am I bearing the fruits of Christ's life in me?

John is not letting anyone off the hook, no matter who we are, prominent, titled, powerful, or poor and off the radar. "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".

There is a legitimate judgment of God which moves us to look at ourselves and examine our lives. These words of John prompt the people to ask the right question; "What then should we do?"

St. Augustine observed that "God gives where He finds empty hands". Our sins distance us from God. Our hearts change when we violate moral and ethical boundaries. We can't receive the gift of God's forgiveness when our hands are full or our fists are clenched. John is trying to shake us out of our complacency, to open our hands, to move our hearts once again toward God.

After Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, Christians, many of whom opposed King and the Civil Rights Movement, became more self-reflective. It took the Southern Baptists 150 years to apologize for their support of slavery. It was not until 2008 that Bob Jones University admitted their error in barring black students before 1971. Their apology reads, "We failed to accurately represent the Lord and to fulfill the commandment to love others as ourselves" (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.261).

John's altar call is gentle. One would think that he might call them to an ascetic life style like his own or some other form of disciplined piety. He does not. What John does do is challenge them to act morally and ethically within their different spheres of life. Bearing the fruits of repentance means living a life of integrity within our life's calling. He calls us to share with those who have less. To tax collectors who feel convicted and ask what to do, John simply says not to collect more tax than what is prescribed. To those serving as soldiers, probably meaning there were Roman soldiers in the crowd, John says act justly toward others. In John's words, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages".

As Jason Byassee, a theology professor at Vancouver School of Theology, reflected; "Really? That's it? That's it, John says. Share. Don't coerce. Be content. Small as they may seem, these are specifically economic priorities that would indeed turn the world upside down—John's and ours" (Sojourners Magazine, December, 2015, p.48).