

The Joy of No

Luke 3:7-18

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

Rev. Pen Peery

December 13, 2015

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 expectations, and all were questioning in their own hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying,

“I baptize you with water; but the 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 hook is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather 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.

One of my great joys in being a pastor to this downtown church is to witness the way that people in the city gravitate to our building. Every day of the week we have people wander through our gates with cameras around their necks, taking pictures. Many time people will ask to see the sanctuary, or the Ben Long fresco of the Good Samaritan.

As Charlotte continues to grow – in numbers and in diversity – I suspect we will more and more become a kind of cathedral church for our city; a place that provides

a spiritual home not only for our members but for those who are passing through because of business or leisure.

I also suspect that there will be more people who will come to our church – be it during the week, or on Sunday morning – who will be very unfamiliar with the Christian story. Some of those people will have grown up in a Christian home but not practiced the faith in a while. Others may have little knowledge of the faith – and will come here because they are curious about this good news that we proclaim and what it might mean for their life.

Just imagine what it might be like if you were unfamiliar with the Christian story and you walked into worship this morning. You know it is Christmas – and you know Christmas has something to do with the birth of Jesus. You know that Christmas has something to do with hope, peace, joy and love. And you know that the guy or gal who stands in the front of the church way up here in this lectern-looking thing, wearing a robe and reading from the Bible is supposed to say something important that might help you figure out what Christmas means.

And then you hear me read: *You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come! Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not produce fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!!!*

Merry Christmas!

Is he always like that? you might ask the person sitting in your pew.

And if the person who answered you has been committed to this Christian thing for any length of time, they might answer – oh, he’s just talking about John the Baptist. You have to pass through him if you want to get to the baby in the manger.

That’s true.

Before we get to the little town of Bethlehem we have to go through the wilderness and meet John. And John the Baptist doesn’t use words like hope, peace, joy and love. John uses words like REPENT! And UNQUENCHABLE FIRE!

And the gospel writer Luke tells us that what John preaches is good news.

+ + +

You know that repentance means to turn around. To go a different way. To reorient a current practice in your life.

In the Greek the word is *metanoia*.

Preachers love showing off the little bit of Greek they remember – and I’ll bet that almost every Advent you have been coming to church, you’ve heard one of your preachers remind you of what *metanoia* means.

But taking the fancy out, here is what it really means: no.

I think one of the reasons it is so shocking to meet John the Baptist when we are on our annual pilgrimage to welcome the baby Jesus in the manger is actually not because John looks strange...we hear about that in the other gospels...wearing camel's hair, and a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey. I think what shocks us about John the Baptist is that – like most prophets who speak for God – one of the main messages John speaks on God's behalf is “no.”

We're used to hearing God say “yes.”

We're used to divine affirmation – of who we are, and how hard we try.

We like the feeling of God encouraging us, telling us we are doing a good job, answering our prayers for help, validating our choices.

But sometimes, God says no.

And that is not as comfortable.

I know with a high degree of certainty that can be a difficult word to hear because I have now parented four two-year olds.

Two-year olds provide an interesting study in human behavior. A two year old is what life looks like, unfiltered. Strong will. Clear preferences. And an unyielding conviction that you are the center of the universe. I'm not sure those characteristics every really go away for many of us, but when you get a little older, they become easier to hide or control.

My son Liam is in the middle of his two-year-old stride. He's a sweet kid...pretty easy going and happy...until he hears the word no. When “no” happens, there are blood curdling screams, there are tantrums, there is pouting, there are tears.

And then, of course, he's fine.

Sometimes it takes 38 seconds.

Other times it takes the entirety of supper.

But, he's fine. And what we know, of course, is that two-year-olds need to bump up against the limits of no so that they can learn what it is to live a healthy, centered life.

That's what John the Baptist was proclaiming in the wilderness.

That's the message he preached in order to prepare the world to encounter Jesus. John said “no.”

And before we get too caught up in John's language - about axes lying at the root of the trees, and winnowing hooks beating against the threshing floor, and wheat being separated from the chaff that will be burned with unquenchable fire - keep in mind

that when John says no...indeed, when God says no...that “no” is not a complete rejection of who we are. John offers “no” as a corrective.

We need to thin out the parts of our lives that do not bear fruit.

We need to separate the parts of us that are worthy from the chaff that doesn't do anything but distract and keep us apart from our best selves.

True, that word might be hard to hear.

But, don't you see? Ultimately, it is good news.

There have always been two things that fascinated me about this story of John the Baptist.

The first is that he drew a crowd. You might think people would steer clear. It wouldn't be that hard to do...John wasn't standing on a street corner in the city that you pass every day on the way to work...he was ranting and raving out in the wilderness. Yet the crowds came.

Why do you think that is? Why would people choose to traipse out into the wilderness to hear John say “no!” (you brood of vipers!)?

I think it is the same reason why people go to the doctor. They know that something in their life is “off” and they need help diagnosing what it is. Instead of a blood pressure cuff, a list of questions, and some lab work, they head out to the wilderness to hear a sermon about a different way of life - where there is justice and wholeness, mercy and forgiveness; where there is purpose that can only come by living authentically with God. And I think people really wanted to know how they could have a life like that...and so they lined up in the wilderness to listen to John preach.

The second thing I've always been fascinated by is how utterly elementary John's advice is to the people who took him up on his offer of repentance. The question was the same: “what then should we do?”

The crowds asked it, “what should we do?” and John said if you have two coats, share with someone who doesn't have any. And if you have more food than you can eat, give some to people who are hungry.

The tax collectors asked it, “what should we do?” and John said do your job, collect the taxes you have to collect, just be honest about it.

The soldiers asked it, “what should we do?” and John said you have great power, but make sure you use it to keep people safe. Don't abuse your power. Don't be mean.

That's what a faithful life looks like from John the Baptist's eyes: share, be honest, don't be mean. How simple is that?

And how much better would your life be - not to mention our world - if we followed John's advice?

What do you think John would say to us? How would John answer the stay-at-home parents, “what should we do?” Or the bankers, “what should we do?” Or the teachers, “what should we do?” I think we often view repentance as either something we don’t need or as an unimaginably difficult task. Both of those assumptions are wrong. We all need it. And the changes we need to make in our lives are elementary.

Robert was a member of my congregation in Louisiana. He was an attorney and a judge. Robert had always been clear about what he should do - and for Robert what that meant is he should work...as hard and as fast as possible. And that worked out fine, until one day, in his early 40’s, Robert woke up and realized that his life centered around billable hours and Jack Daniels. That night, his wife, Betty, drove him to a rehab center. The next day, Betty checked in the rehab center, too.

Robert spent the next 35 years of his life answering the question differently. “What should I do?” became a question that helped Robert discover where his gifts and his story might impact the lives of others. Robert continued a successful law career. He also helped to start 35 different AA meetings around the city. He was a sponsor to literally hundreds of people from all walks of life - judges, attorneys, social workers, janitors.

When Robert died, there wasn’t a seat in the sanctuary. People were standing in the aisles - crowded in the narthex. It was the most diverse congregation of people gathered to worship God I had ever seen.

On the back of the bulletin was the prayer that God used that help Robert change his life: *Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

It’s almost time for Christmas. But before we get there, we are going to bump into this wilderness preacher named John, who says “no.” You might not know it yet, but there is joy in that “no.” John talks about repentance as a process of purification: cutting away that which does not produce fruit; beating the threshing floor to separate the grain from the worthless chaff; burning that chaff in a fire that renders it history.

And I get that this kind of talk about repentance may sound scary, and odd; that it may sound difficult – and it is: but it is a reflection of how much God loves us that the answer is not always “yes.”

It’s almost time for Christmas. And I realize you may not be ready to think about what in your life needs changing, what priorities need some re-shifting, what deeds demand repentance, but when you are ready –

When you are ready for the way you invest your money and time to be more about the healing of the world;
when you are ready for your friendships to move beyond pleasantries to a more profound relationship;
when you are ready for your marriage to come off auto-pilot;
when you are ready to face your addictions;
when you are ready to stop covering up your anxiety about the future with the things you buy;
when you are ready to move past the fear of your neighbors;
when you are ready to put aside the cynicism that prevents you from seeing the activity of God

When that time comes, the good news is that there is a prophet in the wilderness named John – and his message is compelling enough to call us out...out of our normal day to day, beyond our carefully constructed life...and to help us become more alive – more human – more like the kind of person that God created us to be.

+++