

3rd Sunday of Advent, Year C

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John: Prophet and Herald

The gospel for the 3rd Sunday of Advent in Year C continues the Advent theme of John the Baptist as the herald of the promised good news. In last Sunday’s gospel (Luke 3:1-6), Luke has already connected the ministry and actions of John to the proclamation of the “good news” by the prophet Isaiah:

“⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one crying out in the desert: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” (Luke 3:4-6)

Our reading finds John in the wilderness, baptizing people as he proclaims that his was a “*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” (Luke 3:3). All of this was part of last week’s gospel for the 2nd Sunday of Advent. Yet, there are several verses that fall between the Advent gospels.

What comes before

Just before the gospel passage for this 3rd Sunday of Advent, John addresses “⁷ ...*the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance; and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. ⁹ Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”* (Luke 3:7-9)

In this passage John is portrayed by Luke as a prophet concerned with renewal and transformation. We should not be surprised as his prophetic vocation had been anticipated both implicitly:

“...and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers toward children and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to prepare a people fit for the Lord.” (Luke 1:16-17)

and explicitly:

“And you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” (Luke 1:76)

John’s prophetic ministry was located in the wilderness a good distance from Jerusalem and yet crowds “*came out.*” John’s ministry was carried out in an area just north of the Dead Sea, Al-Maghtas, what we Christians know as “Bethany beyond the Jordan.” It is in the wilderness even today. In Deuteronomy 34, Moses reached the precipice of Mt. Nebo overlooking Al-Maghtas and at last could look into Canaan, the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. Moses looked over and beyond the Jordan River into the place of promise that the righteous would inherit. Tradition holds that this was the place where Joshua led the people of Israel into Canaan, crossing the Jordan River. This is the place where Elijah was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot (ref: Luke 1:17). This is the place where John cried out to prepare the way of the Lord and baptized for repentance of sin – and to renew the covenant with God – crossing over into promise as did their ancestors with Joshua – entering into righteousness. In other words, this location has a “spiritual geography” that is associated with being the chosen people of God, being a covenant people, and seeking righteousness before the Lord. The people are coming to the place “where it all started” to be renewed in covenant and relationship to the Lord.

John’s prophetic message in Luke 3:7-9 is fiery: “*Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance; and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones.*” In addition to the challenge to “*produce good fruit,*” John is asking them to consider their identity. John is clear: religious affiliation is not good enough; it can be an advantage, but it is no guarantee of blessing. Some of the Jews of John’s day thought that mere ancestral ties to Abraham would be good enough to guarantee their blessing. Some today think similarly, that one can be born a Christian or that attendance at church makes one a saved child of God. John warns that such thoughts of inherited salvation should not even cross their minds. Though a good environment and roots can be of benefit, they do not yield salvation. That which saves is not inherited but is a matter of God’s

grace and creative power. That God can raise up children out of stones pictures the reality that God's power is what produces new life.

Douglas Hare (*Matthew*, Interpretation Commentary, p.20) suggests: "The Christian equivalent of 'We have Abraham as our father' is 'We have Christ as our Savior.' While trust in Christ's salvation is a first requirement, it is not the last." Achieving the balance of grace is necessary. Perhaps another modern equivalent to "We have Abraham as our father," might be "I've been a member of this church all my life" or "My parents (and grandparents) have been members of this church all their lives."

John's Baptism

"...the crowds who came out to be baptized by him." (Luke 3:7)

At this point in the narrative there are no baptismal actions, but there is an emphasis on the interpretation of the ritual action itself. As Joel Green [173] notes: "baptism is seen as an initiatory rite of passage as people (1) come away from their normal lives to participate in John's ministry through baptism, (2) undergo a repentance-baptism signifying their (re)new(ed) allegiance to God's purpose, and (3) return to their normal lives having accepted the challenge to reflect in their lives ways of living appropriate to true children of Abraham. John's proclamation ensures that his baptism is understood as an assault on the status quo, that to participate in his baptism is to embrace behaviors rooted in a radical realignment with God's purpose."

The behaviors to be embraced are integral with repentance and thus intrinsic to being a member of the People of God. The people "*came out*" but equally they were being called out of their social norms and everyday lives so as to align themselves with God's Kingdom. As Green notes [165-6], "Through submitting to repentance-baptism, in which their roles were passive, they signified their surrender to God's aim, distanced themselves from past ways of life oriented away from God's purpose, and professed their (re)new(ed) allegiance to his will. By coming out into the wilderness to meet John they symbolized their separation from ordinary life, through baptism they embraced a conversion of loyalties and were themselves embraced into the community of God's people, and in returning to their everyday lives they accepted the vocation to reflect behaviors apropos true children of Abraham

To be clear, what John offers is not Christian baptism as he makes clear pointing ahead to Jesus: "*John answered them all, saying, 'I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire.'*" (v.16) The two baptisms are "connected" in the one anticipates and prepares for the other, echoing the promise from the prophet Ezekiel: "*I will sprinkle clean water upon you to cleanse you from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts.*" (Ezekiel 36:25-26)

John's Instructions

⁷ *He said to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?' ⁸ Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance; and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. ⁹ Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.'* (Luke 3:7-9)

John deliberately challenges their identification and assumptions. In first century thought, to be born of something or someone is to share its character and natures. While the people think that they are children of Abraham, John implies their behavior is not of the character or nature of Abraham. But their behavior

is consistent with that of poisonous snakes/vipers. Even without this identification explicitly developed, the qualities associated with vipers—poisonous, hostile to life, evil—are enough to give rise to John’s question, “*Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?*” Clearly, the crowds are destined for judgment on the day of the Lord. In the intervening days, since they produce no good fruits, they are worthless. They can be replaced by stones.

But not all is hopeless: *God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones.* God’s intent, if necessary, is to make a new people, raised up from the lifeless. This includes people in the crowds who have come out to John. Some scholars offer that this also foreshadows the inclusion of the Gentiles. The true children of Abraham will be anyone who embraces God’s purpose and acts in accord with that purpose. The rest will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Then what should we do?

¹⁰ *And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”* ¹¹ *He said to them in reply, “Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.”* ¹² *Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?”* ¹³ *He answered them, “Stop collecting more than what is prescribed.”* ¹⁴ *Soldiers also asked him, “And what is it that we should do?” He told them, “Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.”*

The basic question is asked three times: *what should we do?* The questions come from the crowd, tax collectors and soldiers - and later in Luke’s writings by a lawyer ([10:25](#)), a ruler ([18:18](#)), a Jerusalem audience in [Acts 2:37](#), a jailer ([Acts 16:30](#)), and a zealous Jew, Saul ([Acts 22:10](#)). The fundamental response will be “What behavior is appropriate to those who claim to have repented?”

In general, to *the crowds*, the response is to share with those who lack the basic necessities of life - something that is expected of all righteous people. This is not something new, but is the consistent message of Scripture. Green [178] notes that “Isaiah had insisted that participation in ritual acts like the sacrificial cult or fasting would be worthless apart from seeking justice, sharing bread with the hungry, covering the naked, and the like (Isa 1:10–20; 58:6–7). Ezekiel remarks that the characteristic behavior of the righteous includes giving bread to the hungry and clothing the naked (18:5–9), and Tobit refers to these same behaviors as the loving acts of the pious (1:16–17; 4:16).”

The spotlight then turns to the tax collectors: “*Stop collecting more than what is prescribed.*” The general opinion about tax collectors is that they were dishonest persons who exploit the system of taxation for their own financial gain and at the expense of their fellow Jews. The system of taxation was rife with abuses of this sort. There were two forms of taxes: direct taxes (the land tax and head tax) were collected by Jewish councils. Collection of indirect taxes (tolls, customs, duties) was handled by private entrepreneurs who bid for this task. The highest bidder won the contract to collect tolls, advanced to the state the amount bid, then set up a machinery for recouping his investment and subsequent costs, and making a profit. This gives a special insight to Luke’s comment: “*Even Roman toll collectors came.*” Even the most despised element of Jewish society was present. John’s reply stops well short of demanding that they find new work. Instead, he challenges them to work out the substance of repentance within the day-to-day activities of their duties as toll collectors.

As with the crowds, John's answer is stated directly and concretely. The penitent is committed to fairness to neighbors, sensitivity and responsiveness to others' needs, and willingness to accept a "no-frills" standard of living (*cf.* 1 Tim 6:8). The tax collector is to perform his job faithfully and compassionately.

How we treat others is a litmus test for how we are responding to God. As Jesus says later, "*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*" (Luke 6:36).

Alongside toll collectors, soldiers are included among those present. Assuming that "*the region around the Jordan*" refers to Perea, these soldiers could have been Jews in the military service of Herod. Then again, they could be Gentiles. As with the tax collectors, the question provoked by John's preaching concerns the nature of one's response: What would it mean to bear fruits worthy of repentance? The soldier is not to take advantage of his authority; he is not to oppress the citizens with threats or violence. In ancient times a soldier was paid only enough to maintain a basic standard of living. Service to an institution does not mean one has the right to rob or take advantage of others' powerlessness. John's reply borrows language appropriate to those involved in military occupations and calls for the cessation of characteristic behaviors by which soldiers manipulate the local populace to their own advantage.

Questions about the Messiah

¹⁵ *Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah.*¹⁶ *John answered them all, saying, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. (Luke 3:15–16a)* After inquiring how they might prepare themselves for coming judgment, now, they ask whether John is the Messiah. Green [180] notes: "Recognizing in John's mission the first hints of eschatological consolation (Isaiah 40; cf. Luke 3:4–6), they wonder if he is God's agent of salvation. For them, the meaning of "Messiah" is manifestly fluid at this point; hope is present but ill defined. They do not know if John and the anticipated messianic figure fit the same profile, and this allows John to begin the process of outlining what to expect of the Messiah. At the same time, he is able to identify his own relationship to the coming one. According to the narrator, John's answer is to all the people; everyone receives the invitation to accept his baptism and receive the baptism 'with the Holy Spirit and fire.'"

Luke has already constructed the first two chapters of the gospel as an extended comparison between John and Jesus as the author interweaves the stories of their annunciations, nativities, and early childhood. The contrasts now come to the fore: (1) The Messiah is superior to John in terms of status. John does not count himself worthy even to serve as the Messiah's slave by removing the thong of his sandals. (2) John characterizes himself as the messenger or prophet who prepares the way for the coming one, using language that echoes Mal 3:1; 4:5, thus embracing the role anticipated for him in Luke chapter 1:17, 76. (3) John designates the Messiah as "*mightier*" than himself

*He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire.*¹⁷ *His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*¹⁸ *Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people. (Luke 3:16b–18)*

There is lots of scholarly debate about the meaning of "*holy Spirit and fire*" as regards baptism. Perhaps simply put, John contrasts his baptism with that of Jesus. The point is not that one baptism is with water, the other in the Holy Spirit and fire (the early church also baptized in water from the beginning), but that John's baptism is *only* in water, that is, a ritual sign expressing outwardly what the person must express inwardly. The baptism of Jesus will be definitive: it will be an act of God bringing salvation (Holy Spirit) and judgment (fire). Nonetheless, in all the debates, there is a convergence of thought in this: it is important to realize that John presents his baptismal activity as an anticipation of the Messiah's; his baptism forces a decision for or against repentance, and this prepares for the Messiah's work.

The image of fire is expanded by reference to the process of separating wheat from chaff. A “winnowing fan” or shovel tosses the mixture into the air; the heavier kernels of wheat fall to the floor, while the chaff blows away for later burning (Isa 21:10).

Green [182] comments: “Although the image described here is generally taken to be that of winnowing—that is, tossing harvested grain into the air by way of allowing the wind to separate the wheat from the chaff—the language John uses actually presumes that the process of winnowing has already been completed. Consequently, all that remains is to clear the threshing floor, and this is what John pictures. This means that John’s ministry of preparation is itself the winnowing, for his call to repentance set within his message of eschatological judgment required of people that they align themselves with or over against God’s justice. As a consequence, the role of the Messiah is portrayed as pronouncing or enacting judgment on the people on the basis of their response to John.”

But is there a connection between Spirit and fire in John’s words? Culpepper (“Luke”, New Interpreter's Bible, 85-6) offers the following:

“What is the relationship between Spirit and fire in this saying? The following interpretations have been advanced: (1) fire describes the inflaming purifying work of the Spirit; (2) the repentant will receive the Spirit, while the unrepentant will experience the judgment of fire; (3) since the Greek term for “Spirit” can also mean “wind,” the meaning is that Jesus' baptism will bring the judgment in a mighty wind and fire; (4) as might be implicit in the first option, “Spirit” or “wind” and “fire” reflect the Christian interpretation of the Pentecost experience; or (5) John saw in Spirit and fire the means of eschatological purification: the refiner's fire for the repentant and destruction for the unrepentant. The last combines elements of (2) and (3) and fits both the historical context of John's preaching and the literary context in which the saying about winnowing follows. Luke, of course, may have seen the fulfillment of this saying at Pentecost in ways John could not have imagined.”

In v.18 we are told that John preached “good news.” This is part of the Lucan transition to move from the ministry of John to that of Jesus. We can assume John preached about the soon-to-come arrival of the Messiah. Craddock (Luke, Interpretation Commentaries, 49) offers this wonderful summary: “When repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news (v. 18). The primary aim is to save the wheat, not to burn the chaff.” John offers hope and new life for the tax collectors, the soldiers, and all sinners. We all can be gathered by Jesus into his kingdom.

As a part of that transition John the prophet challenges Herod to repentance for his marriage to Herodias, the wife of Philip. Luke does not repeat the details of Herod’s marriage nor of his crime against John. Here he simply mentions the imprisonment. Later there will be a reference to the martyrdom of John, but obliquely after the fact (9:9). The vivid details had obviously had wide circulation by this time, thanks to Mark’s account; Luke did not think it necessary to repeat the story.

In Christian biblical studies, "the theology of history" refers to the understanding of history as shaped by God's purpose and action. Unlike secular views of history, which may see events as random or solely influenced by human actions and natural processes, the theology of history views events within the context of God’s overarching plan, especially as it is revealed in Scripture. This perspective assumes that history unfolds according to God’s will and that each event has theological significance as part of a divine narrative. The key aspects of the theology of history in Christian thought are:

Divine Sovereignty: God is seen as the ultimate author and orchestrator of history, guiding events to achieve His redemptive purposes.

Salvation History: This concept focuses on key moments in the biblical narrative (like Creation, the Fall, the Exodus, the life of Jesus, and the anticipated return of Christ) as moments when God directly intervenes to guide humanity's redemption.

Linear View of Time: Unlike some ancient beliefs that view time as cyclical, Christian theology generally views history as a linear progression with a beginning (Creation) and an end (the return of Christ and the establishment of God's eternal kingdom).

Christ-Centered Fulfillment: Christian theology often holds that history finds its ultimate meaning in Jesus Christ, who fulfills Old Testament prophecies and reveals God's character and purpose.

Eschatology: The study of "last things" or the end of history is essential to the theology of history, where God's ultimate plans will be realized. This includes beliefs about resurrection, judgment, and the establishment of a new heaven and earth.

This theological perspective encourages Christians to interpret past and present events with the understanding that all of history is part of God's redemptive work.

Especially among the medieval writers, such as Joachim of Fiore, the theology of history established epochs. For example, Joachim saw three ages of history: Age of God the Father (the Old Testament), the Age of the Son (the New Testament and age of the Church), and the Age of the Spirit (period before the 2nd coming marked by great signs). For the record, people interpreted the 11th century Joachim's theology as reaching the third age with the coming of the Franciscans and Dominicans, the predicted appearance of "two great orders of men."

Our 3rd Sunday gospel can be understood, in one sense, as the inflexion point between the first and second coming when the last of the "Old Testament prophets" - John the Baptist heralds the Messiah of the New Testament. Yet, it is interesting to note that Luke relates no encounter between Jesus and John. In fact, before we are told about Jesus' baptism, we are informed that John has been put in prison! A traditional way of understanding this order of events is that Luke (the rhetorical historian) divides history into three separate and distinct eras. The first is the time of the prophets, which includes John the Baptist. That era ends with the imprisonment of John. John will no longer be in the picture. After that, the time of Jesus begins with a statement in our text about: (1) the opening of the heaven, (2) the coming down of the Holy Spirit in a visible form (dove); and (3) heavenly speech. This era of Jesus ends with his ascension -- related only in Luke & Acts. Jesus will no longer be in the picture. After that, the time of the Holy Spirit (or the Church) begins with a statement in Acts 2:1-4 about (1) something coming "from heaven," (2) the coming down of the Holy Spirit in a visible form (tongues of fire), and (3) heavenly speech.

For Luke, the movement from an old era into a new one required a break from the old -- John is put in prison -- Jesus ascends into heaven. Yet, at the same time, there are common elements in all three periods, such as the fulfillment of promises/prophecies and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The fact that we are living in the third era sometimes needs to be emphasized. There are those whose faith is so centered on the historical Jesus, that they can't live their lives in the new period under the power of the Holy Spirit. If all we do is talk about the historical Jesus, e.g., arguing about the virgin birth, the miracles, the physical resurrection -- we may be making faith nothing more than believing historical events really happened, i.e., a history lesson. While such teachings are certainly part of our Christian confession of faith, for the early believers in the Book of Acts, faith was relying on the power of the Holy Spirit for life today. They recognized that Jesus had left this earth. In order for the ministry of Jesus to

continue, it would have to be done by all the believers who had been filled with the power of the Holy Spirit – not by Jesus nor by particular Spirit-filled people, i.e., the prophets.

Notes

3:7 *You brood of vipers*: An *échidna* is a “poisonous serpent” (adder or viper). The word for “brood” (*gennema* = “that which is born from”) is synonymous with *teknon* = children (of Abraham) in v.8. John clearly challenges the “fruit” of Abraham’s descendents

coming wrath: Is wrath (*orgē*; also used for anger) an emotion or is it a punishment? In most instances it denotes the divine work of judgment, yet God’s serious displeasure at evil is also implied (*cf.* Rom. 1:18; Rev. 6:16; Heb. 3:11). Although direct references are infrequent (Mk. 1:43; 3:5; Mt. 9:30; Jn. 11:33, 38), wrath or anger is an integral characteristic of Jesus himself. His anger displays his humanity and yet its objects point to his deity. He is angry at forces that oppose God, e.g., Satan (Mt. 4:10), demons (Mk. 1:25), leprosy (Mk. 1:41), the wicked and hypocritical (Jn. 8:44; Mt. 12:34), the disobedient (Mk. 1:43), and the unbelieving (Jn. 11:33). His angry sorrow at the Pharisees is that of the merciful Lord whose love encounters only a legalistic burden that wants law, not love, and thus reacts with merciless hostility (Mk. 3:5-6). Especially severe is the wrath shown in the parable against the wicked servant who is so freely forgiven but then refuses to forgive (Mt. 18:34). Terrible, too, is Jesus’ anger at the cities which reject the call to conversion (Mt. 11:20ff.) and at the merchants who desecrate the temple (Mt. 21:12ff.). In a strange parabolic action he also displays his wrath against those who withhold the fruits of repentance (Mk. 11:14; *cf.* Lk. 13:7). This is the wrath of the eschatological Judge who can cut off from fellowship (Mt. 21:12) and cast into Hades (11:23). The same Lamb that comes under human judgment will finally exercise divine judgment on those who refuse his vicarious self-offering.

3:8 *produce fruits as evidence of your repentance*: the word (*áxios*) translated as “evidence” is translated as “worthy of” in other modern translations. The literal meaning is “bring into balance.”

stones: The words for “son” and “stone” are nearly identical. In Hebrew son is *ben* and stone is *eben*. It is likely John is making a pun.

3:10 *What should we do?*: Our English translations miss a vital connection with this word in our texts. The Greek word translated “do” (*poieio*) in vv.10, 11, 12, and 14 is the same word translated “bear” in vv. 8 & 9. Like the good tree naturally “bearing” good fruit, so the “doing” by the crowds, tax collectors, soldiers, and others, grows out of having repented, having a changed mind and heart and life. Theologically, that is the necessary order. The converted heart produces the new works. Doing good does not make one repentant; but true repentance produces the proper, good fruit. Sharing one's food and clothing, and living within one's means doesn't make one a Christian; but being a Christian should result in such deeds. However, practically and therapeutically, sometimes the order is reverse. “It is easier to walk your way into a new way of thinking -- than to think your way into a new way of walking.” Still, even this process requires a “change in mind” (*metanoeo*) to force oneself to act or walk in the new way.

3:15 *the people were filled with expectation*: the word expectation (*prosdokia*) always carries a sense of either fear or hope

3:16 *He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire*: in contrast to John’s baptism with water, Jesus is said to baptize with the holy Spirit and with fire. From the point of view of the early Christian community,

the Spirit and fire must have been understood in the light of the fire symbolism of the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4); but as part of John’s preaching, the Spirit and fire should be related to their purifying and refining characteristics (Ezekiel 36:25–27; Malachi 3:2–3).

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