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## **“What Should We Do?”**

Luke 3:7-18

Third Sunday of Advent/ Year C

December 13, 2009

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**O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.**

Of all the emotions that we experience in our lives, perhaps the one which we most welcome is joy. To be sure, other feelings are equally potent- sorrow, fear, anger- and they undoubtedly have their place at our tables, but it is joy, to whom we would pass the yams first. The experience of joy causes, rather than is a symptom of, celebration. The church is no stranger to joy. We find it in our prayers, in the loving smiles which we have for each other. In both the formal and informal ways in which we worship. We find it in our songs: “Joyful, Joyful, We adore thee, God of Glory, Lord of Love,” “Joy to the Word, the Lord has come”. Strangely, when we are asked the question “What is joy” the answer is terribly elusive. Joy is not as simple as we think it is. Jesus, himself, talks about joy ever so often. In the gospel of John, he says “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. These words flow from his mouth at the last supper in which he will have mouth to eat. A last meal hardly seems terribly appropriate for a discussion of joy, but joy is funny that way. As much as we would like to equate joy with happiness, they are not the same. Happiness turns up more or less where we expect it too- a good marriage, loving friends, a rewarding job, a much needed and pleasant vacation. Joy, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the God who grants it. It can pop up just about anywhere it pleases even in today’s gospel lesson.

John the Baptist is certainly a sight to behold. With his rugged sun-burnished face caked with dust and grit, his confident eyes framed by a mane of shaggy unkempt hair, he seems to exude an intensity or at least an oddness. The animal skins which he wears for clothes (certainly not the height of fashion) and the honey and locusts upon which he dines with gusto do not help the case for his “being normal.” From a distance, he resembles some sort of maniac escaped from an asylum. He wanders back and forth in the wilderness, in the dry scrubland, far from the cities screaming “Prepare the way of the Lord“. If we’re honest, he is the type of person, most of us would cross to the other side of the street to get away from. Or for those of us who tend to take more pro-active approaches, we would probably have reported him to the local psychiatric center. John’s appearance and his lifestyle are certainly bizarre. There is, however, something about “the one crying in the wilderness” that seems to attract people. Certainly, there are some who come to gape and oggle at the strangeness of it all, but others’ hear in his preaching something more; something wondrous and terrifying. The words that spill forth from his mouth, are not sweet and syrupy like the honey which crosses his lips and crystallizes on his beard. They aren’t the platitudes of the politicians and the high religious officials. His words are hard and daring like those of a gunslinger at the high noon of all history. His message is not gentle, or boringly pleasant like some quietly trilling flute. His message is one piped in the key of fire, in the expectant and powerful rhythms of running feet and

rushing water. And my, O my, do the feet run to meet him! From all directions the crowds come. From Jerusalem, from the cities of the Decapolis, from Nazareth, from Bethlehem. Crowds hurry into the middle of the wasteland, to the banks of the Jordan river. The gospel gives no explanation for this phenomena. John certainly didn't dispatch invitations to baptism. Their motives for coming are as varied as their backgrounds. This should not surprise us. We, too, come to Church with our various motives in tow. Genuine faithfulness, fear of the great beyond, looking good to our neighbors. Just to name a few. For most pastors, the simple fact that people come to hear their sermons, or come to the baptismal water, or darken the door of the church is enough. Not for John the Baptist. His reception of the growing crowd would send a church growth expert into an apoplectic fit.

His words pierce those with ulterior motives right to the core of their beings. He hisses at them, calling them a "brood of vipers." "What do you think your doing slithering down here to the river?" Just like snakes fleeing a brush fire, they are attempting to flee God's judgment. The crowds, may be standing there, staring at John (probably not very lovingly at this point) in the face, but their spirits are slithering to escape the inevitable by whatever means necessary. They seem to think that washing themselves in the muck of Jordan will keep the refining furnace away from them like a wet blanket holding the fire at bay. John, never one to mince words, makes it clear to these misunderstanding and spiritually desperate people, that there is no easy way out. After all, living a life of faithfulness and obedience is never easy.

"Do you think a little water on your skins is going to deflect God's judgment?" John tells them, "It's your lives which must change, not your skin". Without stopping he continues on. He dismantles in one fell swoop, all those excuses that they and we offer as to why our lives are not in need of change. John tells the crowd to not even think about pulling ranks by claiming Abraham as their father. Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there- children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. In other words, your spiritual ancestry doesn't matter. You could be the tenth generation of Christian in your family. You may be the first. It doesn't matter. You could list all of your supposed spiritual accomplishments. It doesn't matter. You can claim, till you are blue in the face, that you've been a member of this particular church for forty years. It doesn't matter. God can raise children up from the very stones if He so desires. He did after all make Adam from mud. And we are just as much children of Adam (and we know how that story ended up) as we are of Abraham. "No" John the Baptist says: "What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Is it bearing fruit with which to feed the world because if it's not. If it's dead wood, then it needs to go onto the fire.

This certainly doesn't sound hopeful much less joyful at all does it? But wait, John's fire and brimstone, his harshness contains within it a note of grace. He could have left them with this rather confrontational rebuke, but he doesn't. The crowds, still spiritually desperate, no longer want the easy answers. They are willing to here the hard answer. In genuine desire and faith, they ask "What should we do?". Three times in the next several verses. And John, the animal skinned, honey eating radical, turns their world upside down again. He tells them to repent. "Sure," the crowds think, "they can do that."

After all, they did come to John to be baptized for the repentance of sins. John then proceeds to tell them what repentance looks like. A repentant life is a new life. It not just the shedding of an old skin, but the shedding of one's entire being. You who were once a snake are a snake no longer. With new life comes new responsibility. An entirely new way of living, as a person and as a community, is demanded.

John tells them "that they must share their food and their clothing". "If you have two coats, give one away." The local IRS agents, a group whose position on the likeability scale has sadly not improved much in the past 2000 years, want to know what they should do. "No more extortion, collect only what is required." The soldiers too, sabers rattling on their hips, ask the same question. "No shakedowns, no blackmail, and oh, be content with your rations" John responds. His focus seems to be very materialistic. At first glance, he seems to imply that to avoid judgment we buy God off with good deeds. Such an interpretation is wrong headed, it places the cart before the horse. The good deeds are the fruit of faith, not the purchase of it. Faithful living, repentant living involves an entirely new concept of life, a new vision of earth. A vision in which the neighbor is cared for and compassionate justice is supreme. A vision of the coming kingdom that even now is beginning to arrive.

What John preaches to the people is so glorious, so world altering, that they start to wonder if he is the Messiah. John will not permit that kind of thought to continue long. He intervenes and in doing so displays a concern and love that we have been hard pressed to see before. "I'm baptizing you in this river. He who comes will ignite the kingdom. He will place a fire within you, the Holy Spirit, changing you from the inside out. This is good news" he says. The Messiah approaches. And with his approach, there is the potential for change, there is the offering of a new way of life and the promise of spiritual power to do it. "What should we do" we ask. Repent. Live. Care. The kingdom comes. My friends, the snakes will flee the coming fire but from the ashes of those who have been consumed in the fires of the Holy Spirit, new growth will sprout and, in joy, the wilderness will bloom.