

IS YOUR LIFE GREEN AND BLOSSOMING AND BEARING FRUIT

Third Sunday of Advent

December 15, 2024

John the Baptist was the greatest show in town. Well, maybe not in town, more like out in the wilderness around the Jordan River. It was there that he performed his prophetic ministry. In appearance, he was unkempt, sporting a scraggly beard, wearing a camel hair coat as he continued to shout out his strong message of repentance. Hundreds of Jews were flocking to hear him, and to be baptized. Some came with broken hearts, desiring to be cleansed of their sins and to begin a new life. But to be honest, many came with mixed motives, more out of simple curiosity, seeing this man as some strange powerful charismatic oddity.

Those with mixed motives made the journey down to the Jordan River that day with no thought to any demands this simple ritual cleansing might make on their lives. They only thought that submitting to a simple baptism; getting their hair and clothes wet and messing up their makeup, was a minor inconvenience that would require no long-term change to their ordinary routine, their status in society, or any spiritual transformation. But John the Baptist saw through their shallow façade.

It was to these people that John let them have it with both barrels. The Message Bible records the prophet's words in graphic detail: "John exploded: 'Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your *life* that must change, not your skin. And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father.' Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a

dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire.'"

These snakes, as John called them. They were only there to perform a fashionable religious baptismal ritual and nothing more. Their hearts remained hardened. They were self-assured and cocky, relying on their religious pedigree, pulling rank as children of Abraham, as Jews. Relying on their status as God's chosen people. And so, if God wanted them to get a little wet that day, then I guess they would.

John zeroed in on this over-reliance on their pedigree and shouted out to them that religious status was not all that important, because children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. As he spoke to these children of Abraham, John was also speaking to you and me, telling us that the label "Christian," is also a dime a dozen. He's saying, watch out for any over reliance and security you may have on your Christian pedigree. John would say that being a cradle Episcopalians, or a cradle Catholic; that being baptized and confirmed in the church; although truly sacred moments holding deep meaning; but in the grand scheme of our lives, these rituals are ultimately not what matters the most.

What matters most is that your life and mine remain alive spiritually; that we continue to be trees that are green and blossoming. Unfortunately, there are many cradle Episcopalians who have been baptized and confirmed, who are no longer active in church. The fire of their faith has long since cooled. They are not growing and changing and transforming spiritually. And if our lives are not spiritually alive and bearing good fruit,

then we are, according to John the Baptist's words, just deadwood, good for nothing but to be thrown into the fire.

So, what is it that enables us as Christians to be spiritually alive and green and blossoming and fruit bearing? Last week I gave an important part of that answer when I said that we need to always be open to change and to passion and a desire for God, for humanity, and for all of creation. This openness to change, and a heart of desire and passion, is the driving force that will enable us to always remain spiritually young, green, and blossoming, no matter what our physical age may be, or the decades we have been a Christian and attended church.

When a tree or bush starts showing blossoms, it is a sign of health, and a sign that it is preparing to bear fruit. But what kind of fruit is supposed to be produced from the Christian spiritual life? In today's Gospel, the people asked that question of John. They wanted to know what they should do to produce good fruit. The answer he gave them might surprise you. He didn't tell them to go regularly to the synagogue, and to the Temple on feast days. He didn't say for them to live a righteous and holy life by obeying the commandments of God. Most of these people were probably already doing those things.

Those people were being called on the carpet by John for not being more active in ushering in God's reign of peace and hope and love. John told them what they must do: "If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry." To the tax collectors he said: "Collect no more taxes than the government requires." To the soldiers who came he said: "Don't extort money or make false accusations. And be

content with your pay.’” To understand what John was trying to tell these people, we need to have a better grasp on the culture of that day.

John the Baptist said that if you have two coats, you should give one to the poor. The word translated here as coat, is literally a tunic. A tunic was worn under an outer garment. A better translation might be a shirt. Sometimes people would wear two tunics if it was cold enough. So, it would not be unusual for someone to own two or three tunics. John is telling the people to give one of their tunics to someone who has none.

Next, we are told that tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked what they should do. Tax collectors at the time were paid a meager sum for their work. It was understood that they would collect more than was required in order to make a living. There was a strong temptation for them to collect even more than enough to make a living. The Message Bible translates John’s response to these tax collectors: “No more extortion—collect only what is required by law.” Doing what John required would have significantly reduced their income and level of comfort.

Then there were soldiers who came to John asking what they should do to produce good fruit. John said: “No shakedowns, no blackmail—and be content with your rations.” This requirement would have severely restricted the lifestyle of these soldiers as well. Men who had become accustomed to the fruits of their unethical immoral work on the side.

So, how might we relate John’s ancient cultural requirement concerning tunics and food and tax collectors and soldiers to our lives today? Now I’m about to get way out of my depth here, because I have a very limited

understanding of economics in American society and the topic of financial management. But I hope that in what I am going to say, you will get the general gist of how God's Kingdom is supposed to work, and in ways that are very different than how our secular society works.

Let me try and approach it this way. Desiree and I, for many years, have had a financial manager who has worked with us to prepare for our eventual retirement. On the radio I have regularly heard of advertisements for financial managers. They were referred to as "wealth managers," individuals or companies who aren't available just to manage your "finances," but who promise to manage your wealth. And speaking in these terms is the kind of language that resonates with many of us as American capitalists.

Capitalism can be defined as an economic system in which private individuals or groups own and control property according to their interests. The essential feature of capitalism is the motive of making a profit. In publicly traded companies the focus is on the shareholders and seeing that their stock continues to increase in value. Capitalism is a good system in many ways. However, in America it has resulted in a great disparity between those who have, and those who have-not.

God's kingdom is supposed to work very differently than this system. In the reign of God, those who have two shirts are called to give one to someone in need. We are called as children of God, not to focus on increasing our financial portfolio simply for our own benefit, and for that of our children, but to help people who are in need. If John the Baptist were to speak to you and me, what do you think he might say to us? I have asked this question of myself. What do you think he would say to you given your current financial

status? John might say to you, well done my sister. You are caring for the poor. You provided a meal for that neighbor of yours next-door when he was sick. You didn't store up a wealth portfolio only to benefit yourself and your children, but you cared for and lifted up those who are less fortunate.

Here again John's words as recorded in The Message Bible: "What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire.'" May our Christian lives be green and blossoming and bearing the kind of fruit, that will lift up the poor, and transform the society around us into the glorious reign of God.