

## ADVENT III – 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer.

*Amen.*

“So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people.”

The good news! Where have I been all fifteen times this gospel has come up during my time in ministry? I think I always accepted this as “good news” because that’s what Luke called it.

Good news. What is John the Baptist proclaiming?

- 1) He speaks of “the wrath to come.” God is as angry as can be and is coming to prune and to burn, and it sounds like “scorched earth” to me, because John is not making any exceptions here.
- 2) Cleaning the barn is next, tossing the mown barley and other grain in the air so the chaff pops off and the kernels fall to the floor and are picked up by the hired hands and by scavengers, and the chaff is swept up and burned until all is empty and all is clean.

The message is clear: God is cleaning house and barn and field and orchard and vineyard and only some will be left. John is saying, “God is enraged and it’s all your fault. It’s because of the way you are living and treating one another that has provoked God to this destructive frame of mind. You did it. You are doing it every day, and you don’t seem to care. It’s all about you: what you want, when you want it, and as much as you can get.”

The only good news I hear is that there is a way out: CHANGE. Change your ways or suffer the consequences.

The message is really rather contrary to Jesus, who is always talking about God's love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness. The way John describes it, it is all up to them: they can behave their way out of the wrath; they can earn a reprieve by being good boys and girls.

This lesson comes for us at just the right time, because every year, at least since my childhood, every popular singer has been on the air during this month with this familiar ditty: "Oh, you'd better watch out, you'd better not cry, you'd better not pout, I'm telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town."

This is the theology of threat and retribution, and there is something in the human heart that believes this so deeply that it is enshrined in our culture in new ways in so many generations. Remember Charles Dickens? Remember "It's a Wonderful Life"? Remember Flip Wilson and Maude and their "God will get you for that!"?

And this is both popular and political. In the song, it's "he sees you when you're sleeping; he knows when you're awake..." And in politics it's "Big Brother is watching you."

There is a big EITHER/OR in human culture and society: EITHER faithfulness because of a threat, OR faithfulness because of hope.

Who is the God to whom we pray? Is it the God of vengeance? —the God whose anger becomes hatred becomes retribution becomes death and destruction. Or is it the God of love? —the God whose anger becomes mercy becomes forgiveness, an invitation into a new way and the promise of companionship on life's journey.

Back to John the Baptist: he *is naming some good news*: a way out. But that way out is not only a promise of escape; there's also a warning, a danger. The one who is coming will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John never describes the Spirit, and we have to wonder what

kind and intensity of fire he is talking about—about fire singeing our hair so we just get the smell of death, or hot enough to melt gold and burn off some of the impurities, in other words, losing part of the life we now value so much, our greed and our self-centeredness.

I think this is the tension we are living with right now on a global level, the tension between authoritarianism and democracy. Of course, neither of these is equivalent to Christianity nor to any of the other of the world's faith traditions that over time have shown themselves as revelations of God's very being.

What is the worldview behind authoritarianism? It is that some—an elite few, either chosen by God or the current powers that are in charge, and we shall remind you who we are and what you owe us every day. We know what is best for the world; we, your leaders, need to be followed and obeyed; we will make decisions for you; we will shape our society according to our precepts; and we will structure society to maintain that authority now and into the future. So, don't worry your pretty little heads about it. And, of course, we/I should be well-rewarded for taking that burden from you.

What is the worldview of democracy? It is that the world has been "created somehow," or exists with certain unalienable principles, that all folks are created equal, have a right to breathe, eat, have shelter, and find a place for themselves that can be for good, more than for the good of others, for the good of the whole of humanity. And, I would add, good for all that humanity has been given dominion over, particularly the environment. There is an egalitarianism here, not for everyone to have the same things, but for everyone to have equal opportunities to find one's true place in the world, to be healthy and whole, neither better nor lesser than others, and able to give and receive with the fulness of one's being.

Which of these is harder to believe in, to trust?

Many would say that democracy is harder to trust, because it is slow and sloppy, and you have to have some kind of faith in something that is unseen. You have to have some sense of letting go and beginning again, or as Christians say it, a sense of forgiveness and redemption, because when we cannot begin again there are just too many dead ends for humanity to survive.

Others would say that authoritarianism is harder to trust. At any given time one has to believe that there is a cadre of super-intelligent human beings who can organize and maintain us on our journey into the future, a group that will know what to do when a pandemic strikes and will actually do what is needed; that will perceive when economic imbalances become so severe or off-kilter that there will be an eruption, an earthquake, or a whirlwind of resentment and rage, which results in revolution and chaos—and they will address and correct that imbalance and not make it or let it get worse.

Every day in the news the choice and its consequences become clearer—perhaps only for some because it is so tempting for many among us to leave the choice and the work to others.

Back to good news:

First, in our cultural language we know that Santa Claus is coming to town (and please recognize that I speak for those of us in this room. I hope we are well aware that for a great many Santa Claus will not come, and for many of those, they have as yet no idea of Santa Claus, much less Jesus Christ. The challenge to and for us is to make Jesus known and to help others receive him.

Second, whereas John may have given us a very mixed message today, when I look at Zephaniah and Isaiah, they are truly sharing good news,

and it was given well before there was a Messiah, only the promise of one. Our ancestors must have felt that they were torn between two different types of authoritarianism: the king and his followers on one side, and the patriarchs and prophets on the other. They had choices to make with only a promise to guide them, and they kept on choosing to keep hope alive. *They kept the faith.*

What do we have? Humanity will always have these same choices, though we might wish it to be different. About twenty years ago, I was part of an Advent Eucharist at the National Cathedral in Washington. The much-acclaimed preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor was there, and she was talking about the way God works in a somewhat different way than I have been. She talked about her impatience with God, that she wanted God to be quicker about change, and she used an image repeatedly throughout the sermon, an image of rocks and water. She said there were many times she wished that God might come in a cataclysm so great as to pound on the rocks by the sea and blow them up much as a tsunami would, to just get the change done, to knock out and destroy evil. She used her hands to describe this, cupping one hand and driving the other fist into it. Boom! Pow! God strikes and the change happens! And then she said that it was her experience that that was not God's way, that again and again, God chooses a slow, steady, drip, drip, drip, to wear evil down and to wash it away. Think of anything we have heard described as evil in our lifetimes. Has God ever removed it in any other way?

We live with choices. We also live with a history of redemption again and again, redemption within our own hearts and redemption within the world we live in—redemption, release, rebuilding, making new. We hope because we have grounds for it. How blest we are! And now it is our gift to share that hope with those who seem to have none.

Of course, the best news we have today is in Paul's letter to the Philippians, wherein he calls us to rejoice greatly and not to worry—not to worry. The passage concludes with his powerful assurance and blessing: "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." *Amen.*

+JLJ