

Sermon Discussion Information

Sermon Series: Advent 2017 “Arrivals”

Sermon Title: “What Shall We Do?”

Sermon Text: Luke 3:7-20

Listener’s Journey: I want my listener to recognize that the Incarnation of God was in part a corrective to the human problems of indifference, cruelty and greed. And, for those courageous enough to live their lives in the flow of Jesus’ compassion, mercy, and justice imperatives—we are given both a deep sense of purpose and a good measure of complexity.

Unique Quotes from Sermon:

The phrase “No Good Deed Goes Unpunished” refers to the reality that some good deeds, particularly intervening acts, can lead to negative consequences. For instance, stepping in to help a victim of a criminal act can lead to the criminal turning on you. Or, what we refer to as “whistle blowers” who report an abuse or ethical breaches in an institution. These women and men typically pay a very high price for being honest—they get fired and, in most cases, have to fend off outlandish attempts at character assassination.

Today is the Third Sunday of the Advent season in which our community is focusing on the theme “Loves and Labors.” Today’s Scripture speaks to the sometimes-high cost of loving and laboring for and alongside other people’s well-being, especially those who are marginalized. The first recorded whistle blower (for whom no deed went unpunished) of the New Testament of the Bible was a relative of Jesus who was nick-named: “John the Baptizer.” In Luke’s Gospel biography of Jesus, Luke provided a very detailed historical background of John being the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah and a description of John in the 20’s AD traveling across the countryside around the Jordan river¹ as an itinerate preacher.

In the Gospel of Mark we read that John lived alone in the wilderness wearing clothes of camel’s hair and living mostly on eating grasshoppers and honey.² John delivered impassioned if not sometimes highly charged rhetoric about sin and wrongdoing and what he envisioned would be the character of the coming Messiah’s work. Most central to John’s work was his message calling for people to turn from wrong doing and be baptized in water as a sign of a changed life and an ongoing commitment to lead more virtuous lives.

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This is such a fascinating biblical account for two reasons. First—earlier in Luke’s gospel Luke framed John as the long-promised for-runner to Christ. And, John’s approach to preparing the way for Christ did not include a traditional religious message but rather a forceful corrective to the human problems of indifference, cruelty and greed. Second, for all of the passion and striving of John in his truth telling....well...as the first whistle blower of the New Testament who experienced first-hand the notion that no good deed went unpunished—John was locked up in prison for speaking truth to power. Today’s Scripture ends with Herod recounting everything that John had said about him and deciding to lock him up in prison in an attempt to get control of John’s critique. And, we can read in the Gospel biography of Mark that, at the whim of King Herod’s wife and her daughter at a party, Herod ordered John to be beheaded with his severed head then brought to the party on a dinner platter.

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¹ <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/19215/luke-31-3-was-luke-mistaken-about-the-year-in-which-john-the-baptists-preachin> (accessed 12-15-18)

² Mark 1:1-15.

This Scripture is an important Advent text in that it helps us recognize that beyond John the Baptizer, the Incarnation of God was in part a corrective to the human problems of indifference, cruelty and greed. And, for those courageous enough to live their lives in the flow of Jesus' compassion, mercy, and justice imperatives—we will recognize that we are given both a deep sense of purpose and a good measure of complexity. Let's look at Incarnation as God's corrective first.

To be clear—the Christian tradition's larger understanding of the Incarnation, or God coming in flesh in the embodiment of Jesus means *many things* including:

- A clarified understanding and explicit example of the benevolent character and attending presence of God in our lives. Because of, and in Jesus, God is proven for all time to be *with* us, and *for* us.
- An Incarnated Christ articulated and embodied a compelling way for us to connect to God on the basis of grace (or unmerited favor) through faith over and above religious rule keeping meritocracy or a religiously bounded and weaponized version of certainty.
- The Incarnation of God in Christ also gave us body of written down teachings that frame a holistic faith, invite us to a generous inward spiritual journey and an outward journey as well that works alongside God in the work of human flourishing for all people and all created things.

God as Incarnation was also curative of the wrongs of our world including:

- The violent practice of scapegoating. Since the beginning of time humans have demanded vengeance and even blood sacrifice to get even with one another and to appease violent portrayals of God as a deity who somehow needed blood sacrifices in order to love all that God created. In Jesus, all of that scapegoating was proven unnecessary and finished for all time. On this side of Jesus ending our spirals of violence we are expected not to get even or to spill blood but to forgive one another as God forgives us on the basis of God's unstoppable and unending grace and love.
- And, in today's Scripture—the forerunner of the Incarnation of God addressed the human problems of indifference, cruelty and greed and pointed humankind toward the compassion, mercy and justice of Jesus Christ.

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So, why do people struggle to have clear-eyed courage to live in the flow of John's corrective and then Jesus' compassion, mercy and justice imperatives? Well, we don't want our heads on a platter. And, because the work comes with the weight of complexity. For instance, the First Covenant community spent eighteen months reflecting on the reasons why we gather. One of the six big reasons flows into the work of today's Scripture and says: We Gather for Social Transformation *We care for our world*. We lift up the God-given dignity of all people and learn from people who have been marginalized, oppressed, and under-resourced. Together, we pursue compassion, mercy and justice.

The greatest complexity in this work comes when we move into the work of compassion, mercy, and justice alongside others and come face to face with unchangeable failures of people and systems and unsolvable dilemmas including unchangeable failures, embarrassing blind spots, and unsolvable dilemmas within ourselves. In those "What then shall we do?" moments we are not given answers as clear cut as John the Baptizer to the crowd, tax collectors and soldiers.

Three Discussion Questions:

1. How have you experienced the truism: "No good deed goes unpunished"? (Personal sharing)
2. How do you wrestle with both the content of John's words and the way he spoke truth to those around him? (Exploring the text)
3. How do you find meaning in the work of compassion, mercy, and justice? How do you experience complexity and suffering because of the work as well? (Direct application)