



A Successful Sermon
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (December 12, 2021)

Right off the bat we see why there is a wide selection of Christmas cards and not Advent cards. “Happy Advent, You Brood of Vipers” might not sell too well as a holiday card, but these words are certainly a wake-up call for the audience of John the Baptizer.

Those ring hardly as welcoming words to the ears of those who have invested traveling time, money, and energy to go to the wilderness to hear what this man of God has to say. The blow is not softened by what comes next, which proclaims wrath, judgement, and the people’s need to repent. Can we call that Good News? The evangelist Luke certainly does, when he affirms in the final verse of his 3rd chapter: “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”

“Good News!” Some Christians seem stuck on the assumption that we hear the Good News only when (if?) we hear encouraging words to love, to forgive, to be patient with one another and to build good relations. Some other people hold strongly on the idea that the “Good News” is only about the consoling presence of God in the Spirit and the comforting words of Jesus who sends people home miraculously healed or brings the dead back to life. Nobody can deny that a sermon build on the announcement of God’s unconditional love and the promise of eternal life is uplifting and makes people want to return to hear more. But that’s not the only thing prophets announced, nor the only way Jesus spoke.

So, I need to ask: What kind of sermons would you say are effective? Are rough and challenging sermons acceptable? God seems relentless in comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. What camp are you in? Now? You can’t always be in one and never in the other. At times, God’s Word sounds consoling; at other times, it sounds challenging, requiring trust and willingness to change. What do you do when God’s Word pokes you in the eye? Hide? Spar with God? Run away? Or are you willing to examine your conscience and return to God for a more focused life?

John’s idea of preaching the good news is pretty scary and out-right offensive. Yet, his sermon seems to be *successful*: all sorts of people ask what they need to do to “[b]ear fruits worthy of repentance.” (Luke 3:8) Just consider that the people have gone into the wilderness willingly and with good intentions: they *want* to be baptized by John. They are aware that his kind of baptism is one of “repentance for the forgiveness of sin” (Luke 3:3) so they must have an inkling that something needs to change. Their predisposition is positive; the ground is fertile for a good harvest. But this does not stop John from using harsh words! Why? Is he not going to alienate people?

Luke does not tell us how many couldn't take the roughness of his talk and walked away. If I didn't know any better and read the Bible literally, I would believe that all who heard John had an epiphany, acknowledged their predicament, and bit their breast in an act of contrition. But experience tells me that some, if not many, cleared the area quickly. Why endure the abuse? Why not search for more benign pulpits? People are quick to rationalize and find justifications for their life choices. In that case, it is logical to seek and follow happier preachers. It comes easy for me to think that some people got upset and left wild John to his offensive locust eating habits and hostile language.

They have come to hear John speak with their own expectations. What they heard blew their mind away. Their departure is not documented in this passage of Luke. We know from several other accounts that Jesus himself encountered resistance and was abandoned by even his own.

But what we see in today's gospel is that some people do seek John out and want to hear from him the Good News. We ourselves still come to him and the Word of God challenges us also to live a righteous life. You see, God's Good News is not only delivered when we get warm and fuzzy inside. The Good News comes to us even and perhaps especially in forms and words that make our noses curl. If we are willing to listen and become as simple as little children, we might be surprised beyond astonishment and laugh out loud at God's ingenious ways to call us back.

John is not content at seeing a crowd swell around him and people lining up in swimming suites and towels. He wants what's best for them. So, he chooses to shock them out of their socks and calls them names! He wonders what makes them think they can escape the wrath of God. Have they come to be saved or to be spared? Sometimes, people turn religious just in case, and Baptism quickly and carelessly becomes an insurance policy.

What John seems to be asking is: "Are you serious about your commitment? The wrath of God is what will bring your sin to your attention; it will be painful, but it will be your salvation if you are quick to see and repent. Are you willing to do your part to prepare the way of the Lord? Are you ready to risk what is dear to you, what you are attached to, to make space for the Kingdom of God in your heart and in your neighborhood? Will you make the crooked path straight and the rough way smooth? Will you accept that salvation is for all the people?"¹

What John is doing is laying out God's bold vision for the world. In his hard-to-hear speech, he is describing God's design for righteous living, and his address is directed especially to the rich and those who hold power. In God's Kingdom, resources are shared, those who have do not take advantage of the have-nots, and the powerful do not use their influence to silence the voice of the disadvantaged but use their power to advance the flourishing of the whole community. In God's plan, the poor are uplifted and those with access to resources are humble and responsible with their means. This is good news!

The gospel critiques the misuse and abuse of power. The gospel turns the world upside down and lifts up the lowly. Don't we want to be part of that vision? John is practically

¹ See Luke 3:4-6

indicating that the gospel has deep cultural, personal, and political ramifications which turn everything upside down. Those with possessions, tax collectors, soldiers, you and me...John doesn't let us off the hook too easily. He grabs our attention. His desire is for us to receive the Good News and turn our life around. There is a reason to rejoice. Even as John gives us a challenging wake-up call, the Good News is that the wake-up call is itself the Good News and has the potential to produce salvation in those who have ears to hear.

Please, join me in prayer:

Wake us up, Lord, to the needs all around us. As we trust that you hear the cries of our hearts, turn us from our selfish ways, and rouse us from our complacency to serve you in thought, word, and deed. Give us hearts full of rejoicing, through Christ our Lord. Amen.