

## Year C Advent 3 Joy in the House of the Lord Luke 3 vv7 to 18

Coming wrath? The ax ready to cut? Unquenchable fire? How is John's message "good news"? Luke assures us that John is proclaiming good news so let's figure that out.

Last week we finished with John repeating the words of Isaiah: "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Then, in his very next breath, John is chastising the crowds flocking to him, jostling to have their turn to be plunged into the Jordan River – the sign that they are turning back to God. "You brood of vipers!" he yells at them. A viper is a family of deadly poisonous snakes – rattlesnakes are part of this family, for example. So calling the people a group of vipers is quite the insult. These are the people cheating others out of their money, worshipping other gods, ignoring the needs of their vulnerable neighbours – basically, living lives turned away from God's ways. But, here they are, heading to John, seeking forgiveness. John senses the insincerity of their motives and calls them out: You are the ones who will be left out in the cold when the Messiah comes, bringing God's kingdom. God's anger is directed at you and others like you, he says. You think that because you have Abraham as your ancestor, you are guaranteed a place in God's kingdom. Well, that's not the way it works. People unrelated to Abraham will be welcomed into God's kingdom and you won't be. Bring John into our day and he might be yelling out something like: You hypocrites! Just because you're baptized, hang a cross around your neck, and call yourselves Christian, does not mean you are in the kingdom of God.

Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Don't just talk the talk, John tells them. Walk the walk. If you're turning back to God, it should be obvious in what you say and

do, he says. The crowds, rather than angrily stomp off because of John's insults and chastising, they stay. They stay and they ask him, "What then should we do?" You say, "bear fruits worthy of repentance" but what does that mean, what does that look like, what do we do?

Luke does something nifty here. In Matthew's Gospel, John is just speaking to the leaders of the people – the Pharisees and the Sadducees – but, in Luke, John is talking to everyone...the crowds...and that includes us. Today, we ask John for clarification. That repentance that he called us to last week, that turning back to God's ways to live in God's kingdom, we want to know what that looks like in our daily lives.

One part of this message from John today that may not feel relevant to our lives is the urgency. He's crying out with a sense of, "C'mon people...get your act together now! Hurry up! The axe is at the root of the tree now!" Most of us just don't have that sense of urgency – the hurry up, turn to God's ways before it's too late sort of feeling. Perhaps this sense of urgency is something we need to regain. If we thought that every moment could be our last moment before we had to stand before Jesus in judgement, that would certainly change our every thought, word, and deed, wouldn't it? John has a sense of urgency because he is announcing Jesus' arrival on the scene in the flesh. Jesus is there. John knows Jesus is the Messiah. The Messiah is the one who will bring God's kingdom on earth as in heaven. The arrival is now, it's happening now, John thinks. And he is right but not in the way he's always thought. Jesus brought God's kingdom alright. And Jesus embodied the perfection of God's kingdom. Jesus invited people to live in God's kingdom. Through our baptisms, we do live in God's kingdom. But God did not

wave a magic wand and heal all of the brokenness and make us perfect people. It's a long, ongoing process toward perfection because love must be chosen or it is not love. Kindness must be chosen or it is not kindness. Hearts and minds must change. Life with God in God's kingdom is a choice because people don't change when you tell them change. People must desire to change.

Over the years the exciting knowledge that Jesus had brought the kingdom and we could choose to live in God's kingdom, and spread the fulness of the kingdom throughout the whole world by loving our neighbours and by respecting the planet...that knowledge faded away...and, with it, the excitement faded away, the urgency faded away. John is letting us know today that now is the time to reclaim that knowledge, that excitement, that urgency. We are waiting for the arrival of Jesus Christ just like those crowds and, when John said "all flesh will see the salvation of God", he really meant it. It's not too late for anyone sitting here. It's not too late for anyone we care about. Just look at the unlikely responders who came to John today to find out what to do to live in God's kingdom.

The crowds were there...maybe there were some rich people, some leaders, but most were the poor and the marginalized, the ones frowned upon by others. The tax collectors were there. They were dishonest, money-grabbing traitors working for the Roman Empire. The soldiers were there. They often killed people to earn their pay. They roughed people up to scare them into giving them money. They were all there, all asking John, "What then should we do? How do we bear fruit worthy of repentance?"

To the crowds, John said "Be generous." To the swindling tax collectors, John said, "Practice justice." To the rough and ready soldiers, John said, "Be content with

what you have.” Generosity. Justice. Contentment. It’s what parents teach their children: share, be fair, don’t bully. Notice that John does not tell the soldiers they have to stop being soldiers and become pacifists. He does not tell the tax collectors to stop working for the Roman Empire. We are called to serve God and God’s kingdom right where we are, “to take [our] stand for neighbour amid, rather than apart from, the turbulence and trouble of the present age, and to do good because of, not in spite of, [our] compromised positions” (David Lose, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Luke takes our messy, ordinary lives and makes holy even the most mundane elements of daily existence.

“In the city museum of Braunschweig, Germany, hangs a painting by Lucas Cranach the Younger depicting [today’s Gospel scene]. Cranach’s John is a hairy, muscular, roughhewn man who stands on a gnarled and burnt tree stump pointing toward Christ with one hand and lecturing the crowds with the other. But while John is portrayed fiercely, those listening to him are eager, even glad, to receive what John offers. Why? Cranach explains by stretching a banner beneath the scene that contains the verse that inspired his work: ‘And soldiers also asked him, ‘And what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages’” (story from David Lose). Faith doesn’t need to be heroic. Faith is normal people, living their normal lives, but living them God’s way: share, be fair, don’t bully.

Throughout Luke’s Gospel and in the Book of Acts which he wrote as well, joy is often associated with a faithful response to the presence and message of Jesus. In Luke’s parables, there is much rejoicing over the one sinner who repents. In Acts, each time more Gentiles turn to follow Jesus there is rejoicing. What John points

us to and what Jesus gives us, is the invitation into a life that becomes better and better aligned with God's ways and, as we travel that path, there is much joy. Not that life suddenly becomes perfectly wonderful. Joy is ours because we know we are in God's kingdom and we know we are journeying ever closer to the fulness of that kingdom on earth as in heaven. There is joy in a faithful response to the presence and message of Jesus. Last Monday morning, when I was doing my Morning Prayer, I suddenly heard a loud voice in my head say, "There will be joy in the house of the Lord." Joy is a word that I hear quite often and it's being said around here a lot lately. We have the presence of Jesus and we are hearing the message of Jesus and we have joy. Life is not perfect but we have the deep joy of knowing whose people we are, of knowing where we are, and of knowing where we are going. John tells us that "all flesh will see the salvation of God" and we don't need to be heroes to see it, we just need to keep asking, "What then shall we do?" and start where we are and keep moving forward and there *will* be joy in the house of the Lord.