

December 16, 2018  
New Song Episcopal Church  
Matthew Helmke  
(All lectionary passages are included below the sermon text.)

## **The Time of Almost, But Not Yet**

I love John the Baptist, at least the book version. He might make me alternately cheer and feel uncomfortable in real life. Would we cheer when he taunts the religious leaders by calling them a brood of vipers? By warning that God's ax is at the root of the trees, ready to cut down any that do not produce good fruit? Things about sharing what we have with those who are in need and against extortion and theft? In retrospect, some of that seems really obvious, but a quick glance at our world reminds me that the messages still need to be sent.

What about the part where he says he is not the one to come?

There had to be some disappointment in the crowd at that moment. I mean, this guy is saying all the right things. He is drawing people to repentance and proclaiming good news. What more do we need? Why can't this guy do the winnowing and the separating the wheat from the chaff and the burning?

Welcome to Advent. The time of the announcing. The time of expectation. The time of almost, but not yet.

Good is coming. Rejoice! Our promised redemption is near! Our Even though it is not yet here.

Advent is a time of preparation, getting ready for the coming of the Lord, for that moment when light enters and dispels darkness. In all of the Gospel accounts, the role of John the Baptist is to prepare people to receive the one who is coming. In Matthew's Gospel he says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

"Repent" is a scary word for some of us. It doesn't have to be, but for many of us it is tainted by past experiences with hell, fire, and damnation preaching styles full of scornful words and scathing rebukes. And yet, the word itself simply means to change course, to recognize when you are going the wrong way and adjust yourself appropriately.

Do you speak harshly toward others? Maybe you didn't notice it earlier, but you are noticing it now. Repent and choose to speak gently. Do you judge others because of how they look, dress, speak, or smell? Now is the time to stop and choose to override the initial feelings of judgment and instead choose to go out of your way to love them. Did you say something to your kids or spouse or friend or coworker that you wish you had either not said or had said differently? Repent by going to them and apologizing and making things right in the relationship.

This is repentance: noticing that we are not perfect, and choosing to pursue the better when we discover the worst in ourselves. That is not scary. That is not judgmental. That is growth.

John the Baptist is not a polished preacher. He is not a politician with clever, inoffensive rhetoric (is that a bad example in today's world?). He comes across as harsh, but let us not confuse his manner with his ultimate message.

The crowd responded with, "What then should we do?"

John the Baptist would have been familiar with today's reading from Zephaniah. In this and in other passages, we hear wonderful things about the one who is to come and the great hope and benefit for those who love justice and strive to be righteous.

Here, John the Baptist gives everyone a practical path forward and encouragement toward the light and expectation of hope.

In Matthew, the phrases, "You brood of vipers!" and "Who warned you to flee...?" are directed to the religious leaders, who John implies are failing the community. On them, he brings the full measure of his wrath.

In this section there is a sentence that I think merits our focus. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5 to 7, Jesus says to beware of false prophets saying, "You know them by their fruit." Here, well before that time, John the Baptist uses the same metaphor, telling everyone very clearly that it is the obvious output of their lives which indicates whether they are followers of God.

Who might we like to say this of or to today? I think the very same people in our

society at large. The ones who loudly proclaim that they ascribe to the correct doctrinal beliefs while at the same time supporting actions, words, politicians, and policies that pursue the opposite. You know a tree by its fruit. And maybe this recognition is also accompanied in my heart by judgment, something that is not mine to proclaim.

Now, it does not require judgment to tell the difference between an apple and an orange. On the other hand, when I cross the line from fighting for love, peace, and justice to instead dishing out ridicule and scorn, I become the very thing I judge.

That brings us back to today. To Advent. To the idea of preparing ourselves for the coming of light into darkness. I humbly and kindly urge us all to take time this season to gently, but honestly examine ourselves. Where we find areas that need improvement, let us all repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Amen.

### ***Zephaniah 3:14-20***

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;  
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter Jerusalem!

The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,  
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;  
you shall fear disaster no more.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion;  
do not let your hands grow weak.

The LORD, your God, is in your midst,  
a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,  
he will renew you in his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing  
as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,  
so that you will not bear reproach for it.

I will deal with all your oppressors  
at that time.

And I will save the lame  
and gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise  
and renown in all the earth.

At that time I will bring you home,  
at the time when I gather you;  
for I will make you renowned and praised  
among all the peoples of the earth,  
when I restore your fortunes  
before your eyes, says the LORD.

### ***Canticle 9 Page 86, BCP***

### ***The First Song of Isaiah Ecce Deus***

#### ***Isaiah 12:2-6***

Surely, it is God who saves me; \*  
I will trust in him and not be afraid.

For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, \*  
and he will be my Savior.

Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing \*  
from the springs of salvation.

And on that day you shall say, \*  
Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name;

Make his deeds known among the peoples; \*  
see that they remember that his Name is exalted.

Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things, \*  
and this is known in all the world.

Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy, \*  
for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: \*  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

### ***Philippians 4:4-7***

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

### ***Luke 3:7-18***

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.