

Philippians 4:4-7 (NRSV) ~ Luke 3:7-18 (The Message Bible)

Then What Are We Supposed to Do?

December 16, 2018 ~ Third Sunday of Advent

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Introduction to Gospel Reading

I bet your throat is parched, and the skin on your face is starting to feel the penetrating heat of that desert sun. We are still out there in the desert with John the Baptist, where we were last Sunday, waiting for him to wind up his rant, hoping he will get onto the baptizing part in the River Jordan soon. (Won't that river water feel refreshing!) But you know how those prophets and preachers do go on. And John, here—well he's just closed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and is now turning his fiery eyes straight at us.

Sermon:

What do *you* do when somebody scares you? What about when you are watching a scary movie? I will confess, I usually close my eyes and wait for that scene to pass. I've noticed I also do this when I hear someone speak (whether on the news, or live) whose words scare me, or upsets me: I close my eyes. I don't know why I do this. I guess maybe I'm trying to disconnect myself from the person who is scaring or upsetting me. So—now you know-- if *you* are talking to me and I close my eyes...

If you happen to be King Herod—and somebody scares you, you put them in jail. That's what King Herod did to John the Baptist in the very next verse, v. 19 of Luke's Gospel. John the Baptist had some kind of power that he, King Herod, did not. He wasn't sure what it was, but King Herod didn't like it. John was getting way too popular, and Herod had heard that John was just the warm-up band for the Messiah about to enter center stage. So Herod locked him up in jail.

But, King Herod didn't realize: you can't overpower the Truth by imprisoning its messenger. Even with John the Baptist in prison, the Word became flesh. Even with John in prison, the Truth was revealed to all flesh in the life of Jesus. John did his part before he landed in jail. The deed was done: John prepared the way for Jesus' coming both with what he said *and* what he did. In today's text, John models what self-awareness and humility look like. He knew his part was and stuck to it. Did you notice how even when the crowds started to wonder if he might be the Messiah, John corrected them not trying try to grab even a spark of Jesus' glory. "No, I am so not the Messiah. I am a mere stagehand, to the One, way more powerful than I, who is coming."

"Then what should *we* do?" This was the question that the crowd, the tax collectors, the soldiers asked John in response to his call to repent. Or as Eugene Peterson renders it, his call "*to change your life, from the inside out.*" Yes, **to turn**. And this is our question today, as well. Then what should *we* do, here in snowy Marshfield, Wisconsin on December 16, 2018? The crazy thing is this: John's answer on that hot

day out in the wilderness in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, still rings true, a clarion call for us right here and now.

Let's break it down a little: What does it mean to "bear fruit worthy of repentance" today? Prophet John was very specific:

- **Share your stuff:** your coats and your food so everybody has what they need.
- **Don't abuse your power:** Whatever power you have in your job: Don't abuse it for personal gain. (That's essentially what he was telling the tax collectors & soldiers, knowing the common abuses of power that were practiced in those two positions.)

What about us. What if everyone really **did** those two things? Hunger, homelessness, and the root cause of the #MeToo movement would be solved. But let's be honest: that's a huge leap, and these are hard turns to do even on a small, personal scale. Can we really teach ourselves to be content with what we have? And how can we become people ready to give away our stuff? We may not need two coats, but we really like that other coat. We need one that other color, don't we?

As small and trivial as these micro decisions may seem in the context of the cosmos, they are code for something much bigger. To repent, to change from the inside out, **to turn:** we have to become people who think in "we" rather than "me." To fully engage the fire of the Holy Spirit, to move from the house of fear to the house of love: is to be all about building community—it's a turn toward a "we," rather than a "me" way of life. John is telling us here: To be Christ's disciple is to be a "doer" for the sake of the community. Both the community in which we live, the local community—and also the global community.

Let's think for a moment--When we hear the word "repent" – *which way do we turn?* With our fearful hearts we may be tempted to close our eyes, or turn away from the evil and corruption that scare or repel us. We may think, if we shut our eyes or turn away we can distance ourselves from these problems that may seem somewhat removed from our every day lives.

What issue or problem most burns your heart? What curse against God brings you to your knees?

- Maybe it was news of the 7-year-old Guatemalan girl, Jakelin Caal Maquin, who died of dehydration and shock after crossing the southern border into the United States with her father as part of a group of 163 people who surrendered to Border Patrol officers on the night of Dec. 6, Jakelin was one of the 15,000 migrant children currently being held in nearly full shelters here in the US.
- With the sixth anniversary this past week of the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting that took 27 lives; we were reminded of the 17 deaths this year, at

the Mary Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, on February 14: yet the shooting in Lakeland, Florida, was just one of now over 307 mass shootings in 2018.

- Or perhaps it's the opioids crisis that will cause again today, another 115 people to die after overdosing on opioids, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. What is going on in our lives and our country that is driving so many children of God of every economic class and color to turn to substance abuse as their only way to get through the day.
- Or maybe heavy on your heart today are the people who lived in the 14,000 homes lost in Paradise, Ca, due to the "Camp Fire" wildfire. And the knowledge that these fires are likely to increase according to Scientists who tells us that both dry conditions and extreme winds are being intensified by climate change, "California is only expected to get hotter and drier."

I hear the Prophet John telling us today that we *cannot* look the other way. We cannot close our eyes to these and all the other curses of our time, and call ourselves Christ followers. We are in some way related to these atrocities and responsible to help turn them around. Apparently the instinct to turn away from or to turn inward was a challenge 2000 years ago too. John is telling us today: To repent, does not mean to circle the wagons. It's actually the opposite: to repent means **to turn toward** the hurt, to open our eyes and trust Holy Spirit Fire to turn the hurt around.

You may be thinking about now, wow: I thought today was supposed to be the Sunday about JOY. Here's my mood changer turn. Who took joy last Sunday when the Green Bay Packers beat the Falcons 34 to 20? Did it give you joy all week? (Raise hands). I'm willing to bet that some of you (maybe the ones wearing the Packer gear) were even *ecstatic* about it.

"The word "ecstasy" comes from the Greek, ekstasis, which is derived from *ek*, meaning out, and *stasis*, a state of stand still. To be ecstatic literally means to be outside of a static place. " [Like those string of static losses the Packers endured. And then the WIN!] "Thus, those who live ecstatic lives are always moving away from rigidly fixed situations and exploring new, unmapped dimensions of reality...Ecstasy is always a movement toward a shared life, "wrote Henri Nouwen, Catholic spiritual writer and mentor of mine wrote in 1986. He goes on to teach us, "Ecstatic living entails a constant willingness to leave the safe, secure, familiar place and to reach out to others, even when that involves risking one's own security. On an international scale this means a foreign policy that goes far beyond the question "How can our nation survive?" It would be a policy primarily concerned with the survival of humanity and willing to make national sacrifices."ⁱ

To the question, "Then what are we supposed to do?" We have our answer. The question is, will we? I can tell you—If we do, we will take joy. If you want to experience true ecstasy or joy, don't close your eyes on the hurt in your life and this world.

What does Jesus want for Christmas? I think he wants community, true community that places being human first. If you have two coats you must share with anyone who has none. If you have enough food, do likewise. And don't abuse whatever power you are given: it is a gift to cherish with self-awareness and humility. That's what Jesus wants for Christmas. Jesus wants us to change, to turn, and turn again, for the wellbeing of the world. That will bring joy to the world.

ⁱ Henri Nouwen, *LifeSigns*, 1986, published in *Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader*, edited by Robert Durback, (New York, NY: Image Books, 1997), 224-225.