

Hesed
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

Luke 3:7-18 (RSV)

⁷ He said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰ And the multitudes asked him, "What then shall we do?" ¹¹ And he answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" ¹³ And he said to them, "Collect no more than is appointed you." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered them all, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ 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."

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people.

Sermon:

This is the third Sunday of Advent, known in some traditions as Gaudete Sunday, meaning to rejoice. In our text, we heard John the Baptist's confronting some of the people of his day, calling them to repent before the advent of the One coming from God to inaugurate the Great Day of the Lord's judgment and reconciliation.

Many New Testament scholars believe that Jesus may have been either an early disciple of John the Baptist or just a sort of man in the crowd following the Baptist. Luke indicates that Jesus was also a relative of John. After John the Baptist's execution under the compulsion of his special relationship to God, Jesus stepped out and made himself known, launching his ministry. However, Jesus' understandings of the coming Kingdom of God differed significantly from John's in that John said the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord was coming soon; Jesus said that the Day of the Lord's judgment and reconciliation had come near in him and his ministry and will culminate out in some unknown future.

John and Jesus were leaders of two anti-establishment groups within Judaism. These groups, each in their own way, faced off against the Jewish religious-political-economic understandings and practices of the day. After John's death, we will see his disciples, Jesus and his disciples, and their anti-ingroups in dialogue - another story.

Luke, I believe was what we would call a liberal or progressive Hellenistic Jew commissioned by a prominent and wealthy patron named Theophilus to write a thorough and more comprehensive gospel than had been previously written (*Mark and Matthew*). Luke wrote fifty-

something years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Luke's sense of Jesus's return and the coming fullness of the kingdom was so far out in the future as to be irrelevant at the time, but Jesus' followers were still to be watchful, taking up their crosses daily, and living in expectation.

Luke also wanted to normalize his Jesus community's relationship with Rome to ward off any persecutions. He did this by distancing himself and his community from those trouble-making Jews of the rebellion back in Judea. To this point, when Luke refers to the "Jews", he is generally referring to those elite Jerusalem Jews and their minions, who instigated Jesus' crucifixion. He may also have had in mind some of their rabbinical descendants harassing his community of faith. Therefore, Luke was not talking about what we would call the average Jew on the street. Failure to understand this over the years has led to the Gospel of Luke being used to justify a lot of Christian anti-Semitism.

John states that he is not the expected One, because he understands that the One to come will not be baptized with water, symbolic of cleansing repentance, as he does. No Sir! The One to come will bring God's fiery, wrathful judgment upon the world. John understood that those who had become complacent in their religion, trusting in their covenant heritage as descendants of Abraham against such a day, are like dead trees that no longer bear fruit and are in the process of being cut down or cut out of the promised kingdom even as he speaks.

John also understood that the One to come would call all of Israel, living and dead, to account for their laxness in honoring God, and judge the other nations relevant to their malevolence or beneficence towards God's people, the Jews. As God told Abraham those who bless you and your descendants, I will bless; those that curse or dishonor you and your descendants, I will curse.

To say the least, John was right about some things and wrong about others. In fact, one could say that after John's execution the rest of the Gospel of Luke is the author correcting John's and others' understandings and expectations of the coming Messiah, by defining Jesus as the true Messiah, son of God. I again remind us that Luke was writing long after the destruction of the Jewish world as understood by Jesus, his disciples, and the early Jerusalem Church and had the luxury of inspired hindsight.

Furthermore, John in a typical fiery and confrontational fashion of an Old Testament prophet, challenged the motives of those who had come out from their ordered and structured lives in the city into the disorder of the wilderness to see him. Some may have come out of curiosity; some evidently wanted to participate in John's baptism just to cover their religious bases in case he was right.

John called such people sons of snakes. In Jesus' day, this is one of the vilest epithets you could call someone. Snakes as we read in the book of Genesis were accursed creatures and over time became associated with Satan, sort of Satan's mascots. In addition, male snakes abandon the female and her offspring. So, we need to hear John calling these overly secure, super pious religious people the bastard off-spring of snakes, qua Satan, who either think their Abraham's snake skins will protect them from what is coming, or they are like snakes slithering down to his baptismal waters to flee the forest fire of God's coming wrath and judgment.

When the people felt the bite of John's words, they cried out, "Okay, okay, what must we do?"

Please take special notice of John's answer, considering he thought the Day of Judgment was just around the corner. John tells the people to repent; that is, turn around in their thinking and living. Turn from their arrogant confidence in their heredity and their personal piety. As Israelites, they are not shoo-ins for the kingdom as they think. Furthermore, repentance and getting right with God goes well beyond just a person's religious activities. The fruits of repentance - proofs of people having turned from their self-satisfied collective mindset with all its

abuses and indifference to others, is to be seen in people's willingness to share food and clothing with those that have none; tax collectors stop calculating and collecting taxes according to your greed and the greed of those you work for. Soldiers of King Herod cease intimidating and extorting people. Again, I reiterate that John believed that he was the harbinger of the end that could come at any moment and as such gives religious people what we might call an end-time ethics.

John states clearly that the pathway to salvation in the coming days of God's messiah has little to do with being either Jewish or with the people's sense of religious piety but rather in keeping God's laws and observing various feast days and rituals for the right reasons as measured against acts of loving kindness toward others.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, there is a beautiful Hebrew concept called "Hesed". Hesed is best expressed in English by stringing several terms together as loving-kindness, mercy, and loyalty, whether on the part of God for God's people or the people's relationship to one another. Hesed is not an emotion, something people feel, but rather it is something people do regardless of how they feel.

The one mightier than John, the Christ, came; but he did not come in a great cosmic conflagration of judgment as John and many others expected. Such expectations were pushed farther and farther out in to the future. And people still expect this to happen. Somehow Jesus, born of socially inconsequential parents in a stable, a mild man of peace, a compassionate healer, and a purveyor of God's love is going to return as some transformed fire-breathing, romping, stomping, judging, cosmic Son-of-Man come King riding out of a tear in the fabric of time and space on a white steed leading an army of sky people.

It is so sad that many folks find a lot of comfort in such things at the expense of living in the joy of Emmanuel - God with us now. I think many people in some distorted sense of justice relish the idea that their life will be vindicated in the end by seeing others publicly punished and tormented in hell, and they and their kind receive crowns and vast heavenly estates and mansions. Again, the Christ of God came in the humblest of manner, taught, healed, preached, and was eventually crucified as a criminal - not the messiah of anyone's expectation in his day, and maybe not in ours either.

However, Jesus nonetheless brought an awesome judgment by emphasizing loyal-loving-kindness toward God and others as a critical component of a person's relationship to God. Jesus took John's demands for empathy, charity, and the ethical treatment of others to its ultimate level in the injunction to love the neighbor as the self. This, then, is the truest measure of one's repentance, holiness, and salvation.

With the coming of the Christ, God's demands on a person's life was and is no longer just compliance with a bunch of divine laws or religious rituals as important as they are but encompasses one's very intentions for keeping those divine laws as well as the truth of one's charitable impulses toward others.

We may be able to hide our reasons and intentions from others, but under the winnowing wind of God's Spirit, we cannot hide the truth from the Holy Spirit, which brings all truths to the forefront of God's awareness. I think this is a very important point, especially during this time of the year when charitable impulses run so high, especially toward the young and the less fortunate. Impulses that all too often wane after Christmas turning into indifference or worse yet into the condemnation of "those people" in the new year. Jesus will extend John's end-time ethics for sharing and caring beyond any one day, season, or era.

In the coming of the Christ, God's loving Spirit revealed and judged human actions down to their most secret intentions. However, if we will allow the Spirit, it will also help us address those deep intentions and affect a totally divine orientation to our lives. The orientation of Hesed. In

seeking to love God with all our hearts, we will become empowered to love and forgive others and to seek reconciliation even with our enemies.

Such a divine orientation brings to our hearts and minds a spiritual state of Joy. Joy, as the theologian Henri Nouwen says, stands in distinction to happiness because happiness depends on things external, while joy is "the internal experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death - can take that love away."¹ Thus, we can understand how people can experience joy even in the midst of sadness and loss at this time of the year because the coming of the Christ tells us of God's unconditional "Hesed". Also, the presence of this Joy in our hearts is all the vindication the faithful could ever hope for or ever need.

I also think a part of the Spirit's work is to help us question our motives for doing good and noble things to the point that we come to realize that we cannot always know the truth of our intentions or motives and simply must say, "I want to love God with all my being, and I think I am doing the best I can for the right reasons, and I will trust God's grace to cover what I can't know."

John prophesied during what he saw as the last days of his world. Jesus also looked out into an unknown future as he taught people to show loving-kindness, mercy, and loyalty to one's neighbors as themselves, and in so doing, a person loves God. Interestingly, when you think about this injunction to love your neighbor as yourself long enough and hard enough eventually you may come to see that the neighbor is actually one's unmet self as well as a significant presence of God. Jesus, as I have said, also taught us to honor and respect our enemies, who at the worst should be considered misguided children of God, but they are never to be relegated to the level of sub-humans or demons.

In closing, let me summarize my message today with a little levity: after the christening of his baby brother in church, little Johnny sitting in the back seat of the car sobbed all the way home. His father asked him three times what was wrong. Finally, amid his sobs the boy replied, "That priest said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, and I want to stay with you guys!"

Out of the mouths of babes.

May the spirit of Hesed, sharing and caring for yourselves and others, reign in your life as we revel in the Joy of God's loving-kindness this season made know in Jesus the Christ.

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