

Sermon – “What Then Shall We Do?”
Scripture – Isaiah 12: 2-6, Luke 3:3-14, 18
Sunday, December 13, 2015
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We are delighted to present a portion of Handel’s *Messiah* under the leadership of Dale Rogers at each worship service this Advent. This week, as we draw near to Christmas Day, our quartet presents “For Unto Us a Child is Born,” words from Isaiah 9 which announce a new reign and leadership under the One who shall be called wonderful, counselor, almighty God, everlasting father and prince of peace.

Our first scripture reading, Isaiah 12, is a song of praise by ancient Hebrews who experienced the joy of God’s salvation and who waited with hope for the day all humanity would recognize and submit themselves to God’s loving and just ways. May our hearts and minds be open to the hearing and understanding of the word of God.

2 Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; God has become my salvation. 3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 4 And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on God’s name; make known God’s deeds among the nations; proclaim that God’s name is exalted. 5 Sing praises to the Lord, for God has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. 6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Our second scripture reading is Luke 3. As ancient Hebrews draw water from the wells of salvation and announce the character of God’s governance, the Gospel of Luke introduces us to John, the Baptizer, who also draws water from the wells of salvation in baptism. Luke 3 places the ministry of John in context, historically and in light of the prophet Isaiah, and then gives us the most complete account of his preaching in the New Testament. John’s message is a call to repentance with actions that demonstrate a changed heart. Hear now the word of the Lord.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius... 3 John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make God’s paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' "

7 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? 8 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 of Abraham. 9 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."

10 And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" 11 In reply John said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."... 18 So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “What Then Shall We Do?”

Text: “*And the crowds asked him, ‘What then shall we do?’*” Luke 3:10

Let us pray: For the honesty of John we give you thanks, Loving God, and for those who responded to John’s call asking what they should do. As we prepare for the coming of the Christ child, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

As we continue our Advent journey of waiting and preparing, today we hear from John, the Baptist, *the voice crying in the wilderness*. Throughout the biblical story the wilderness plays a significant role in the spiritual journeys of God’s children. It is a place of prayer and insight, challenge and temptation, revelation and growth. In the wilderness, away from the order and structure of life, one can see more clearly and respond more authentically. When we are in the wilderness, we are often between places. The wilderness can be a transforming experience. Let us not forget that those who were in the wilderness with John chose to be there. They were seeking change in their lives and searching for a connection with their Creator God.

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of the interaction between John and his followers, as recorded by Luke, is John’s honest, straightforward and practical approach to those who came to hear what he had to say. In a time when we weigh our words so carefully in an attempt to be politically and socially correct, this kind of interaction is especially refreshing. John amazes the people! With his openness and honesty, he draws them to himself. He said what others thought but did not dare say. Precisely because of this, they could respond to him with the same openness and honesty. When John told them not to get overly confident in their “birthrights” as religious people or become too uppity about who they were, they heard the essence of what he was saying. They didn’t hesitate in asking him, “What then shall we do? What does God require of us?”

Three times people ask John this question in response to his call for change. Three times John offers a specific guideline. Besides the honesty of the “one crying in the wilderness,” what stands out is the specificity of John’s message! When the tax collector asked “What then shall I do?” – John’s response is specific and concrete. This is also true of his response to the soldier! Both of whom were misusing the power their position gave them.

Today’s gospel reminds us that God calls each of us in unique and specific ways. The answer to the question “What then shall I do?” is different for each one of us. As we discern God’s voice calling out in the wilderness, the answer is personal and specific.

Recently, in conversations with a couple of members, I distinctly heard the question “What then shall we do?” in response to the noise we hear on the news with continued terrorist acts, most recently in San Bernardino, California, the growing threat of ISIS which stands for Islam State in Iraq and Syria and Candidate Donald Trump’s controversial, yet frank and honest call for preventing Muslims from entering the U.S.A. until we get a handle on the situation. With the growing violence and racism within our world, people of faith are asking, “What then shall we do?”

One of the traits John is remembered for besides his frankness was his unusual dress, something Matthew comments on in his gospel... John wore clothing of camel’s hair and a leather belt. I did not fully grasp that my clothes were making a statement about who I am as your pastor until the

Reverend Julie Wells Blythe told me on our first Christmas Eve together that her daughter Sarah loved my shoes! The shoes I wear are a way to express myself and today I am wearing gray shoes.

Gray is a gentle blend of the harsher white and black. Gray is the color our hair becomes as we grow older, wiser, more seasoned in life. In a world where the pendulum swings widely between conservative and liberal perspectives on the challenges before us, I would call for middle ground. No, we cannot stereotype an entire religion based on radical extremists within that faith, nor can we prevent all Muslims from entering our country; however, neither should we fear profiling to the point where we turn a blind eye to an obvious suspicion and put ourselves in harm's way. Jesus encourages us in Matthew 10:16 to be *wise as serpents and innocent as doves*. Let us be both wise and innocent but neither naive nor belligerent. Gray may be the color of a common-sense gun control law which restricts the access to those guns that are essentially weapons of mass destruction but respects the rights of responsible gun owners protected by our Second Amendment.

It is true! John's ethical teachings are by no means radical. He merely provides the practical foundation of sound behavior. He asks them to be willing to give assistance to those in need and share what they have. He encourages them to make an honest living, and treat people with respect and dignity in whatever work they do!

There is often a danger, according to the Interpreter's Commentary, that even people who think they are religious forget this fact... that first of all we must be honest and considerate and kind. When these fundamentals are neglected, all efforts at spiritual development are simply in vain.

Today, this challenge and practical guideline is as relevant as it was two thousand years ago. In the hustle and bustle of preparing for Christmas this Advent, with all that we have to do, may we not forget in our interactions with one another to be honest and considerate and kind. And may we have the courage and discipline to venture into the wilderness of God's presence regularly and faithfully.

Otherwise, in our own small way our lives, as Christians, as people who think of ourselves as religious, negate what we believe... what we celebrate this season and what we proclaim as we gather around the Lord's table. That is –the honesty, the consideration, the kindness of a God who would speak to us with the frankness of John and then come to us in the gentleness and mystery of the Christ child. “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.”

John prepared the way, but even John could not fathom the meaning of Christ's presence in our world and in our lives. When our “to do” list is complete and when we find ourselves in circumstances with losses that we are powerless to change. When we have done what we can and our expectations and dreams are disappointed, God will be here, with us, holding us, honoring us and reminding us of the gifts that grow out of struggle. The God who joined us in our struggle, in the vulnerability of a child, this God will not abandon us. The God whose steadfast love and mercy is beyond our wildest dreams and expectations, this God, will not disappoint us.

What then shall we do? Let us come to the table that has been prepared for the nourishment of our spirits and the strengthening of our lives. So be it. Amen.