

Sermon – Straight Talk
Scripture – Isaiah 12:2-6, Luke 3:7-18
Sunday, December 12, 2021
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Our first scripture reading, Isaiah 12:2-6, 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.

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. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 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. Sing praises to the Lord, for God has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth, Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Luke 3:7-18. 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 historical context 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.

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 to 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 should 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 should we do?" ¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" John said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ 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. 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, John proclaimed the good news to the people. Amen.

The title of the meditation: Straight Talk

*Text: And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply John said to them....
Luke 3:10-11a*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, for the honesty and straight talk of John we give you thanks. As we prepare for the coming of the Christ child, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This fall an opportunity for "straight talk" arose when a neighborhood adolescent boy who regularly hung out in our parking lot and with whom I have conversed was caught on camera in an act of petty theft and vandalism. Your pastor, that would be I, had a choice to let it go (affirming the age old adage "boys will be boys") or to approach the young man and provide an opportunity for redemption. Those of you who know me well are not surprised that I chose the latter. Just call me Johanna the Baptist crying out in the parking lot.

When the young man returned to the wilderness, (i.e. our parking lot), I took the opportunity for some straight talk. I explained that we had documentation of what he had done and what he needed to do to right his wrong. I asked him to return the stolen item, to write a letter of apology, and to provide his parents' contact information for me to let them know about his indiscretion.

What grew out of this honest, uncomfortable, and painful conversation was an opportunity for healing, forgiveness, and redemption. His parents were surprised, embarrassed, and grateful for our initiative. Another friendship was forged in the neighborhood and in addition to the letter of apology, these wise parents asked if their son could do some manual work around the church as restitution.

We arranged for him to come after school three times a week for three weeks and discovered a thoughtful, intelligent, young man who appreciated a second chance and who found affirmation and friendship among Westminster's incredible staff. Our redeemed friend asked permission to continue to join us after school three days a week and we have plenty for him to do.

What then shall we do? The people who met John in the wilderness were drawn to his honest, straight talk, and practical approach. 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 "birthright" 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 expect from us?

Three times people ask John this question in response to his call for redemption and change. Three times John offers a specific guideline. When the tax collectors and the soldiers ask "What then shall we do? – John's response is precise and concrete. *Collect no more than the amount prescribed... and do not extort money from anyone.* This is a clear exhortation not to misuse the power our positions in life give us.

It is also true that John's ethical teachings are by no means radical. He merely provides the practical foundation for sound behavior. John asks us to be willing to give assistance to those in need and share what we have in food and clothing. John's straight talk foreshadows the

gospel, and exhorts us to make an honest living, to tell the truth, and to treat people with respect and dignity in whatever work we do!

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

In the hustle and bustle of preparing this Advent, with all we have to do, may we not forget in our interactions with one another to be honest and considerate and kind. Otherwise, our lives negate what we celebrate this season and what we proclaim as we gather for Holy Communion: that is –the honesty, the consideration, the kindness of a God who would speak to us with the straight talk of John and then come to us in the gentleness and mystery of the Christ child.

John prepared the way, but even John could not fathom the meaning of Christ's presence in our world and in our lives. 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 hopes are disappointed, God will be here, with us, holding us, honoring us, and reminding us of the gifts that grow out of struggle, straight talk, and redemption. 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 understanding, this God will not disappoint us. What then shall we do?

Let us draw from the well of salvation as we prepare to come to the table that has been set by our Savior for the nourishment of our spirits, the forgiveness of our sins, and the strengthening of our lives. So be it. Amen.