



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church

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Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent (Year C, Revised Common Lectionary)

St. Mark's on the Campus

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WHENEVER I HEAR JOHN THE BAPTIST calling those who come to him to be baptized “a brood of vipers”—a bunch of snakes—I’m reminded that John is not a parish priest! John calls the people to repentance in a way that’s more reminiscent of the prophets of his tradition, whose style he clearly follows. We all know that the prophets aren’t always as reassuring as Zephaniah is in the first passage we have for this morning.

John’s interchange with the crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers appears only in Luke’s gospel. When each group asks John, “What should we do?”, he instructs them about what it is to live according to the way of God in each of their cases. He tells the crowds: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” To the tax collectors, he says, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Don’t take advantage of your position of influence over others in a pursuit for more money. His words to the soldiers are much the same: “Don’t extort money from anyone by threats and false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

All three of John’s responses remind us once again of the enormous influence for good and for ill that money and possessions can have *in* our lives and *over* our lives. All three responses are likewise a call for those who follow God to conduct themselves in a way reminiscent of the way God treats us, not taking advantage of a position of power, but using that power to serve others.

If John the Baptist doesn’t sound much like a parish priest, he does sound a great deal like a deacon. What I mean is that if you were to look at the ordination service for a Deacon, you would see that a Deacon is called to “interpret to the church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world... And at all times, a deacon’s life and teaching are to show Christ’s people that, in serving the helpless, they are

serving Christ himself.” So both in John’s instructions to the crowds, to share clothing and food with those in need, and in his instructions to the tax collectors and soldiers about how to use the power they have, he sounds a good deal like what the church calls a Deacon to sound like, challenging those who are listening to move beyond their comfort zone and serve in ways that are not always easy, but which reflect God’s immeasurable love for us all.

There’s a distinct edge to John’s proclamation that we can’t miss: “Bear fruits worthy of *repentance*... The one who is coming has his winnowing fork 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.”

After hearing these words, I’m always brought up a bit short by the lines which follow them: “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” Are we able to hear John’s words as good news? It might be easiest for us to hear good news in John’s words if *we* are the ones who need the coat or the food. Or if *we* are the ones being taken advantage of by others. In other words, if we are in relative positions of powerlessness in society.

And it might very well be true for some of us, or true for some of us in some of the situations of our lives, that we *are* in need and that we are in positions of relative powerlessness. Certainly students find themselves in such positions. Employees often do. Professors seeking tenure certainly experience themselves at the mercy of a system which is sometimes just and other times is not just. And if power is used unethically or uncaringly *against* us, we might very well hear John’s instructions to those with power as very good news—both because we are reassured that *God* is working toward justice—and also because we ourselves are in a position to receive the *benefits* of God’s justice.

It’s also true, though, that most of us stand on the *other* end of the equation in many parts of our lives; that is, *we* are the ones *with* power in many situations. We might be the faculty member in relation to the student. Or we might be the employer. Or we might be the one struggling to be faithful in any number of situations—faithful to God and faithful to those who will be affected most directly by our decisions.

Then John’s words make a much greater demand upon us, and they might call for us to *give up* something rather than to receive something. The cost of this good news might be greater to us.

When the cost of following God is primarily if not completely on *our* side, it might take more from us to trust that the news is good for *us* as well as for those who benefit from God's way of doing things. I'm not sure that I unequivocally support having the mention of God on our money—I'm referring to that phrase, "In God We Trust." However, it's true that it's a powerful phrase to have plastered all over our bills! If you're like me, most of the time you don't even notice that the phrase is there staring you in the face as you go about your day, making your transactions.

But isn't it a powerful metaphor for the reality that the way we spend our lives—including our money — truly does reflect who and what we trust in? There's that old saying about our checkbooks: if you want to see what I value, look at my checkbook. See what I am willing to spend my hard earned dollars on. It applies to our personal lives and it applies to our corporate life as well. What does the way in which you spend your money say about who you are and what you truly value and in whom and in what *you* trust? What does our *church* budget say about what *we* truly value? What does our *national* budget say about what we value and the degree to which our values reflect the claim we make on our money, "In God We Trust"?

What does the way in which you spend your *time* say about what you value? Does as much time go to your family as you want it to? If not, why not? If so, how can you insure that it stays that way? How about your prayer life? Does your time allotment for prayer reflect the place of God in your life? If not, what keeps it from being so? Where does the struggle lie for you? What about the remainder of our lives? Where do they reflect what's truly important to us—the fact that we completely entrust our lives to God? And where do our lives need to be tweaked here and there to reflect more adequately our trust in God? Another way of asking the same question might be, "What is wheat within our lives and what is chaff?" What needs to be done away with so that the wheat grows more effectively to feed both ourselves and others with the bread of heaven?

It's easy to hear John's words about the winnowing fork and the unquenchable fire as threatening to parts of our lives, and if we do, they probably are. Not just because of what we need to give—but because of what we need to *receive* from Jesus—something that we continue to hold at a distance; some way in which we continue to hold Jesus at a distance. The reality is that as much as we give, we always receive far more from Jesus than we can ever offer in return. With each new day, a new

gift comes our way. A gift that we need, sometimes one that we need quite desperately, sometimes a gift we know we need and at other times, one that comes as a surprise—usually a welcome surprise, but sometimes not immediately.

The mistake that all of us can fall into is to think that John's words talk only about some future time and event; after all he says "one is coming," future tense. But Jesus is a living person for us now. Jesus wants to give us more than we can ask for or imagine, more grace than we ourselves realize that we need because it's so easy to get on the treadmill of life and try to keep running it without Him.

On first Advent, I talked about eschatology, the theology of end times. And last week Sidnie talked about Premillennial Dispensationalism. (Did you know that phrase isn't recognized by spellchecker?) This week I had to throw in another phrase about end time theology, and that is "*realized* eschatology." Really both Sidnie and I have been talking about realized eschatology throughout Advent as well, but I'm making it more explicit this week. *Realized* eschatology is the end made manifest *right now*. Made manifest in *Jesus*. And made manifest in *you*. Each time you give a coat to someone in need. Each time you resist ethics that degrade someone over whom you have power, and therefore also degrade yourself—not to mention the God who lives in all of us. Each time you let Jesus burn a bit more chaff away and nurture a bit more wheat in your own life, and therefore in the lives of those around you. Each time, the end which we await is brought near and made real—today, now, in you and in your life, as you follow your LORD Jesus Christ.

I want to close with the words to the Philippians we heard read earlier. They refer to Jesus coming again with power and great glory. *Then*. And *now*. "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 known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Amen.