

Advent 3, Year C, Luke 3:7-18

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Gaithersburg, MD

Rev Sarah Scherschligt, 12-13-2009

Luke 3:7-18

(...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 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 his paths straight. 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'")

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? 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. 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."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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. 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."

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

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["Hope has two beautiful daughters," writes Augustine of Hippo. "Their names are Anger and Courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."](#)

Last week, you may recall that in this season of hope our gospel called us to look at conflict. Our gospel reading introduced John the Baptist. He is the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. He's Jesus' cousin – approximately the same age as Jesus. He was called out of obscurity to preach a message of repentance and forgiveness in order to get people ready for Jesus' coming. His message – repent and be forgiven! – was so powerful that many thought him to be the Messiah. He always humbly reminded people that the Messiah was to come. Luke, the gospel writer,

placed John in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah. Prophets woke people up to their sins and reminded people to turn back to God. Last week we heard these words from Isaiah used to describe the new prophet John: *“Prepare the way of the Lord!”* Like prophets before him, John’s message disturbed those in high places *“every mountain and hill shall be made low”* and comforted those who were in distress *“and every valley shall be filled and the rough ways made smooth.”*

Today we hear from John himself. With the background of Isaiah-like prophecy and a vision of this miraculous reality that God calls forth, John spoke.

Knowing that his mission was to preach repentance and forgiveness; to make the rough ways smooth; we might predict that his words would be gentle and soothing. We might expect him to be like a loving grandmother.

The scene is a kitchen bubbling over with good smells. A child rushes in crying, bleeding, and scared of getting in trouble because has fallen out of a tree she wasn’t supposed to climb – especially not in winter... Now, now honey, why are you here instead of at home? What happened. Says the grandma, and as the child receives a balm from her nana for the physical hurt and describes what she’s done wrong, the grandma just shakes her head.

Oh child, the well-meaning grandmother says, wanting to protect this child from any hurt or pain, don’t you worry, you’ve learned your lesson. Don’t be afraid of what your mother will do. I’ll take care of that. You just sit here with a cup of hot chocolate and a cookie. Let me kiss where it hurts. It’ll all be just fine. I’ll go talk with your mother.

But that’s not John’s approach; not at all. The first words we hear him say to this crowd who has gathered to hear this good news? Not “it’ll be alright” but:

You brood of vipers.

And he keeps going.

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 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. Even now, the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down from the tree and thrown into the fire.”

Like a child who has disobeyed, when we come to God with all our sin and wrongs in front of us, John is pointing out to us that we should also be prepared to meet with God’s anger. As much as it’s unpleasant to believe that we are like spoiled children, indulgent and selfish; it’s more unpleasant to think of God’s anger coming down on us.

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In Bible study a few weeks ago, a group was discussing one of the Psalms in which God was presented full of anger and wrath. It led to a discussion in which many of us present talked about how rarely – if ever – we think of God, at least the God the Father of Jesus, the God of the New Testament – as an angry God. Gracious and merciful, full of patience, wisdom and understanding. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

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The possibility of anger can turn us into runaways and cowards. Like a child unable to face the anger at home, it's natural for us to flee from responsibility at the first sign of anger and judgment on our lives. We are cowards, especially about our own sin. But what it is about the God's anger – different from human anger in that it is always justified and never irrational - that upsets us?

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Thinking about anger, especially God's anger and what it means for how God loves us, I was reminded of a scene from an unlikely movie: *Enchanted*. This movie came out a couple years ago. It's the story of a fairy tale princess who falls out of fairy tale land into New York City. Her life is suddenly a practice in reality and she can think of nothing but getting back to the fairyland. She develops a relationship with a man (of course there is romance ☺) and as their relationship develops, she is introduced to a new emotion. Anger. She gets mad at McDreamy. She actually rejoices when she feels it, it feels so good to her to be angry. And this is a critical point for the movie. At that point in which the ever lovely princess has become invested in this world; you also realize that her anger indicates that she and her Prince Charming are going to make it.

It's because of her anger with him that you know – she really cares.

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“Hope has two beautiful daughters,” writes Augustine of Hippo. “Their names are Anger and Courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.”

This baptism of John's, this baptism of Jesus, it is a baptism that includes God's anger. God's wrath, because that's part of the process of hope. This prophet John shows us God's anger, but also shows us that God's anger is always in the service of repentance and always is pointing us to be forgiven and always enables us to change into the people God desires us to be. Without facing God's anger, we bypass our chance at forgiveness. Without hearing forgiveness, we can't have courage. Anger – courage – hope.

If you were to let God's anger shine into your life, what would it show you? How would it cleanse you? Refine you, challenge you, turn you inside out, bring you to a point of genuine repentance, change your direction, make you more into what God desires you to be?

How could God's anger be a blessing to your life?

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God's anger is an indication of God's love and God's hope – hope for the world and hope for each one of us. It's important to look at our gospel again. Notice what happens to the people after John has proclaimed God's anger. They don't run away, and God doesn't ultimately punish them for their sin.

They stick around and they ask: What shall we do? They say. What shall we do?

If God were *only* an angry God, their question would be left unanswered. "What shall we do" would be met with more anger at best and silence at worst. If that were the case, then we should all take comfort where we can – run to our well-meaning grandmas, our easy fixes and our band-aid approaches to change and leave the angry God stewing alone.

But anger isn't the end of the relationship, it's the beginning of a process called hope, part of a larger project called grace.

The question is answered – and that is pure grace! What shall we do – well here's what you can do to make it right? You who have two coats – give one away! And this is no message for their time – you who have two coats – YOU – there's a box out back. Some cold child needs your coat. Give one away. You – yes you, you scummy tax collectors, you're welcome to forgiveness too! But don't collect more than you should. This isn't all that hard! You soldiers who are cheating others, be honest and true; These are words for our time. Yes, his winnowing fork is coming, yes, the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire, yes baptism of the spirit cleans out our whole lives; yes. This is good news! We are forgiven!

Child oh child, what did you do? Go talk to your mother – she's going to be mighty mad, but it's because she loves you. And because she loves you sooooo much, she'll forgive you. Now let me give you a hug. Skedaddle to your mom. And don't go climbing anymore trees.