

## *GOOD QUESTIONS*

Luke 3.7-18

Advent III, December 16, 2018

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

### **Lesson: Luke 3.7-18**

<sup>7</sup>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? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham and Sarah as our ancestors’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham and Sarah. <sup>9</sup>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.” <sup>10</sup>And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” <sup>11</sup>In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” <sup>12</sup>Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup>He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” <sup>14</sup>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.”

<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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.” <sup>18</sup>So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

### **Good Questions**

“Come, O long expected Jesus, born to set all people free.”

But before then, a messenger – John the Baptist, that odd character - is preaching out in the wilderness, “proclaiming good news to the people.”

That’s how the passage for today ends – as if we have forgotten how this passage began. John, this proclaimer of good news, says, “You brood of vipers, what makes you think that there is any chance of repentance and forgiveness for you?”

That hardly sounds like good news.

Given our Advent theme – “already, not yet” – John tells his hearers that they may already be children of Abraham and Sarah but they are not yet the promise that was made to Abraham and Sarah that, through them, “all the nations of the world would be blessed.”

They may already be living in the “promised land” but they are not yet living that promise of justice their ancestors claimed when they crossed the Jordan.

However far they think they’ve come, they are not there yet.

As I have discovered over the last few days, sometimes “good news” isn’t exactly the news you want to hear.

Sometimes good news is that there is room in hospice care for your mom.

Sometimes good news is that you have finally hit bottom and now you might actually take your recovery seriously.

Sometimes good news is that all those things you thought were so important don’t really matter after all.

Sometimes good news is that, wherever you think you already are - however far you think you have come - you aren’t there quite yet.

John's "good news" that is supposed to prepare the way for the one who will set all people free, may not sound all that good.

But sometimes good news starts with something you don't want to hear.

Later in Luke, Jesus will stand up in his hometown synagogue and read Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor; recovery of sight to the blind; freedom to captives."

But not yet.

When the great Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann reads this passage, he says:

*... whenever it is Advent time, we get John. It is not yet time for Jesus. This is still the time for getting ready. Getting ready time is not mainly about busy activity, entertaining, and fatigue. Getting ready time is mainly abrasive ... asking, thinking, pondering, and redeciding. [John promises that the coming one] "... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" ... [and] I imagine that sounds as weird to you as it does to me. We who are relatively affluent and relatively sophisticated [Brueggemann says] do not talk that way and do not welcome it. In truth, however, being baptized with God's holy spirit does not mean charismatic acting out. It means ... we may be visited by a spirit of openness, generosity, energy, that "the force" may come over us, carry us to do obedient things we have not yet done, kingdom things we did not think we had in us, neighbor things from which we cringe."*

Another kind of good news is coming. But not yet. And, in the meantime, ask good questions.

I would be almost completely in the dark during these days of my mother's hospitalization and transition to hospice care without Patrick. Of course, his presence is invaluable. But what he is really great at is asking good questions. Things that don't occur to me to ask, he somehow knows how to ask. I get overwhelmed with information and I

just nod my head like I understand. Patrick asks questions. I sometimes settle for the answers I'm given. Patrick asks questions.

Among the things you might not want to underestimate is the power of asking good questions.

The people hear John's difficult message and they cry out, "What then should we do?" Not "what should we believe?" Not "what should we say?"

"What should we do?" is a good question even if the answer is "nothing." By asking, we open ourselves to the possibility of something happening in us and through us. We point ourselves in the direction of a potential we don't yet see.

During this time in my family's life, a lot of you have been asking what you can do. That means a lot to me. And, if I hem and haw and finally get around to saying "well, nothing, really" please know that asking the question by itself is good. It lets us know that we are not alone. That you are here for us. You are available even if I have no idea, at the moment, what I can do much less what anyone else can do.

But you asked. And asking is good.

So the people hear John's message and ask: "What should we do?"

And John doesn't leave them hanging. "Find ways to re-distribute your resources," he says, "if you have two coats, give one to someone who doesn't have any and if you have food, make sure those who don't have any, get some."

"Re-decide," as Brueggemann says, how you want to live in this world. Do you want to move in the direction of that blessing to all the world you were promised to be? Or, not to put too fine a point on it, do you

want to be a curse – taking more than you need and leaving others with nothing?

And what I love about this story is that good questions are not just about the questions that get asked but about those who ask them.

The story tells us that there two of the most despised groups of people in that crowd – tax collectors and soldiers, those who are collaborators with Rome and those who enforce the will of Rome on the people.

That’s surprising. What are they doing there? Why are they listening to a crazy preacher out in the desert?

Maybe they are there in the story to tell us that anyone, even some of those people we have written off, can come to a place in their own lives of asking themselves good questions.

And it’s not like people in the crowd say, “we know what *we* are supposed to do but what about *those* tax collectors over there?” Or “what about those soldiers?”

The tax collectors ask their own question. And the soldiers ask theirs.

Their good questions are not about what someone else should do. They ask what they should do, in their particular circumstance and with their particular privilege.

And knowing those questions and being willing to ask them is one of the most important ways that we can head in the direction of good news, toward that promise of blessing the world.

And I think one of the greatest gifts our real friends give us is to help us ask ourselves the questions we need to ask.

Now I am pretty sure that John the Baptist was a pretty prickly guy. I can't imagine that he was all that warm and friendly. But he demonstrates something that our real friends do for us – helping us to ask ourselves those good and sometimes difficult questions.

In fact, when Mary Hunt wrote her book about a feminist theology of friendship, she says “... that everyone can do theology as we seek to ask and answer questions of ultimate meaning and value.” Her book isn't just a sweet how-to book about being a good friend. Her book is provocative and prophetic – about friendship (and specifically women's friendships) as a model that calls into question the privilege of heterosexuality and the power of patriarchy in the interest of doing justice. Friendship, she says, is “a fierce tenderness” that starts with people asking good questions about their lives and the world.

Perhaps you noticed that our Advent Canticle – thanks to Pastor Anita and Ben – has a thread to it.

Advent I, God is the creator of the stars of night with a light that reaches us already and not yet – starlight is a light that is here and is still coming across time and space.

Advent II, God is the teacher that shows us the love that is already within us and not yet fully realized.

And today, God is the friend who goes with us into that tension of already and not yet by calling us into the questions that lead us toward the best versions of ourselves.

In the 1840s, a French wine commissioner was asked by his parish priest to write a poem for Christmas mass. This apparently was a little surprising because the man was not particularly devout. But he agreed. And, as he was writing, he realized that what he was giving birth to was a song. So he asked his friend, Adolphe Charles Adams, to set the words to music.

It was a hit. And, for a couple years, the song was wildly popular in French churches - until the religious authorities discovered that the author had left the church to become a socialist and, it turns out, the friend who wrote the music was Jewish.

The song was quickly denounced.

But it would not go away.

And it made its way to the United States in the throes of the Civil War. An abolitionist, John Sullivan Dwight, found the song and translated it into English – no doubt drawn to those lines about chains being broken and a slave being our brother and “all oppressions shall cease.”

At the time, with the war raging on, the promise of the song was already and definitely not yet.

In the middle of all that prophetic imagery, here’s the line that grabs me today: “In all our trials, born to be our friend.”

In these days, I have learned that good news is not always the news you want to hear - that the promise of blessing the world is already and not quite yet.

I have learned that, in the meantime, it’s important to ask good questions, especially the question about what I should do, because, even if the answer is “nothing,” asking that question opens up possibilities I do not yet see.

I have learned that, in all my trials, what I really need most days is to hear the voice of a friend.

So today, whoever you are and no matter how far you think you have come, today, if you hear that voice, you know what to do ... do not harden your hearts.

## NOTES

Walter Brueggemann, *Celebrating Abundance: Devotions for Advent* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), p.4.  
Mary E. Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology Of Friendship* (Crossroad, 1991), p.13. About "O Holy Night," [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com).