

Sermon Preached December 13, 2009
Year C, Advent 3
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson

Show us your mercy, O Lord, and grant us your salvation. Amen.

Imagine a fairy tale beginning with “Once upon a time the ogre captured the princess, the dragon ate the prince, the witch cast a spell over the entire kingdom..... and they all lived happily ever after!” The first few sentences don't match the final words. Oddly, this seems to be going on in Luke. Here, John the Baptist calls the people a “brood of vipers!” and asks them, “who warned you to flee from the wrath to come!” John says that Christ's arrival will herald a time of justice where those who are unworthy will “burn with unquenchable fire.” The passage concludes with, “in this way he proclaimed the good news to the people.” Good news?! It sounds kind of like scary bad news to me! John the Baptist is blunt. He doesn't mince words. These people aren't his enemies, in fact, they're the ones who're participating in his baptisms; yet he chastises them. It doesn't make sense!

Imagine yourself at home one evening, sitting in front of a crackling fire, listening to Bing Crosby singing “White Christmas.” You’re happily writing Christmas cards, hot cider by your side, while the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree dance merrily across the room. You’re in the holiday spirit. Suddenly a wild man bursts through the door! He’s wearing animal skins and eating locust. He hasn’t shaved - ever! He looks you right in the eye and asks, “What have you done to promote justice and peace among all people? What effort have you made to respect the dignity of every human being?”

These words are from the Episcopal baptismal service. They are things we promised to do when we became Christian. But, right now you’re enjoying a quiet holiday moment! What right has this wild man to come in here and disturb your peace?! The shock you would’ve felt at that moment was what the people felt who are there to be baptized by John. They’re doing the right thing. They’re getting baptized. Why is John harassing them?

John knows that the Messiah, that Jesus, is soon to come. He knows the people must prepare for his arrival. Baptism is a ritual of purification, a

chance for the people to repent of their sins and for the slate to be wiped clean. None of us is perfect. We all sin. We all do things we shouldn't. The people are coming to be baptized and cleansed of their sins before God to prepare for the coming Messiah.

Yet John the Baptist is shouting at them because they only understand half the message. Baptism is only half the preparation necessary. Saying sorry is only half the story. The other half is what you do with your repentance. To repent means to say that you are sorry, but more than that, it means you will turn your life around and truly try never to do that sin again. What John is pointing out is that anyone can say "I'm sorry," but repentance means also, "I will never do it again. I will strive to do the right thing next time."

Many of the people in front of John aren't taking his baptism too seriously, thinking, "I know God is coming and I want to prepare. If I say I'm sorry for my sins, and get baptized, then I'm home free. And anyway, I am a descendant of Abraham. My heritage will protect me."

John's answer is, "No. Sorry. Your ancestry won't protect you. God can turn stones into children of Abraham. They're a dime a dozen." How many of us know someone who feels they can flaunt the rules because of their

connections? John is saying that doesn't hold weight with the Almighty. You're going to be judged on who YOU are, not on your ancestors, not on who you know. And repentance means nothing unless it is followed up by action. You must bear fruits worthy of repentance.

The crowds at this point are getting anxious. If their ancestry won't protect them, they're in deeper trouble than they thought. So they wisely ask John, "What then should we do?" John answers, "share with the less fortunate." To the tax collectors he says, "don't cheat people out of their money, take only what they actually owe." To the soldiers he says, "don't threaten people for money and be happy with what you have been given." All three suggestions are about being content with what we have. They are all about sharing with others or at least not swindling others, not causing them to have less so we can have more. For John, repentance means more than saying we have faith in God, but acting on it towards our neighbor. How we treat others is of paramount importance.

John is pointing out that it's fine to say, "I'm sorry God for being sinful," but unless you follow it up with action, it's a meaningless statement.

Unless people start sacrificing some of their own comfort in order to help or be fair to others, saying sorry is just an empty phrase.

The vows we make at our baptism address these very issues. As we are sitting quietly in front of the fire when John the wild man jumps in he asks us, “What have you done to promote justice and peace among all people? What effort have you made to respect the dignity of every human being?” Part of our preparation for the Christ child is asking ourselves these questions during this season of Advent.

I know that many people in this congregation do some generous things for others. For instance, the enormous amount of work parishioners put into the Faire, and then sharing the proceeds with Neighbors in Need, Esperanza Academy, Communities Together, and many other worthy organizations. We fill the mitten tree every year, and buy Christmas clothes and toys for needy children. During Lent we collect for Undies Sundays. In June we provide a birthday party for children at Hancock Courts. Every Sunday a food basket is collected and offered at the altar. Parishioners go out to serve meals to those in need, and to knit blankets for Project Linus. This is in addition to the many generous things we do for our own parishioners. For instance, giving rides to

the elderly to go shopping or to the doctor's. Visiting shut-ins, who often feel isolated from their church home. Caring for pets or making meals for those who are unable to. I am proud to say St. Paul's takes seriously its baptismal vows. Helping, respecting and loving our neighbor is one of the two main commandments given by Jesus.

But peace and justice and dignity of all human beings involves looking out beyond the Merrimack Valley as well. For instance, how do you vote? Do you vote for candidates based on the peace, justice and dignity of all human beings, or based on what is best for you and your friends only? What about prayer? Do you pray for people outside your immediate circle of acquaintances? How we speak about and whether we pray for those in Iraq, or China, or India, or South America, or Sweden, or Nigeria, or others we haven't met and probably never will, says something about how seriously we take the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus even commands us to love our enemies. Osama bin Laden. Bernie Madoff. Wall Street Executives. Your annoying next door neighbor. This is not idle talk. This is real. And it is hard. But the fruits it bears are transformative.

What about where we work or go to school? Do we take into consideration the dignity of our co-workers and colleagues? Do we gossip, or

slander, or plagiarize? Do we judge others by their skin color or country of origin? Do we look at a Hispanic woman from Lawrence with the same respect as an upper middle class woman from North Andover? What about where you live? Are all members of your family treated with equal respect? Even your brother-in-law who you may not like very much?

We all must question ourselves periodically. Do we come to church to say one thing, but go out into the world and practice another? John the Baptist is scolding those who do that saying, “You brood of vipers! How dare you think that saying sorry is enough, you must change your life. You must practice what you preach. You must bear fruits worthy of repentance.” He may sound harsh, but it’s meant to help us, not to make us feel bad.

Think about the story “A Christmas Carol.” Scrooge was a miserly miserable old man who hoarded his treasure for himself. He didn’t help others, he didn’t treat his employee fairly, he grumbled at his family. When

the ghosts came to visit him, were they good news or bad? ... They had some scary messages, so we might think them bad. They were like John the Baptist.

There he is, poor old Scrooge, minding his own business. He's in his own home, settling down to bed, when suddenly the ghost of his old friend Marley bursts into the room. Then all the ghosts tell Scrooge to repent and do what is right, just like what John the Baptist tells the crowds. By the end of the story, Scrooge discovers that true riches and joy are found not in hoarding and mean-spiritedness, but by living in peace and justice with others and respecting the dignity of all, even tiny Tim. What seemed like bad news to start, turned out to be the greatest news one can imagine.

Amen.