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## What Should We Do?

### Luke 3:7-20

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 16, 2012 by the Rev. Dr. Luke Powery

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John must be having a pretty horrible day because what kind of sermon introduction is that? “You brood of vipers!” That’s no way to begin a sermon. He could at least ease his way into judgment by doing the critique sandwich (positive-negative-positive). “Fourscore and seven years ago” or “Ladies and Gentlemen” maybe, but “you brood of vipers!”? He wouldn’t win any seminary preaching contests with that intro and I’m pretty sure that he wouldn’t be voted in as the next General Superintendent of the United Methodist Church. We would not add John to the chapel staff. Can you imagine his pastoral care sessions or his pre-marital counseling? “Please have a seat you brood of vipers!” John is such an intriguing figure to be chosen as the one to prepare the way for God’s entrance into the world. What was God thinking?

It’s hard to find any trace of grace in John’s troubling proclamation of judgment. His preaching could be called ‘viper homiletical theology,’ spewing venom that scares and shocks and bites and stings and maybe even kills. It’s in the vein of fire and brimstone preaching. John’s not trying to be Mr. Nice Guy. He’s not concerned with building a spiritual fan club. He’s not paid to preach nor does he live on what some Baptist churches call the “love offering.” John isn’t showing much love today, but he sure does tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about the gospel. He’s a weirdo in the wilderness but he has a word from the Lord. A word that slays and a word that saves. A slaying-saving word. A word that makes you say ‘ouch’ but also ‘amen.’ Proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John does not mince his words. His introduction gets the crowds attention and ours too (though I don’t recommend that we pass the peace by saying “you brood of vipers!”) John is serious for serious times and he wants his listeners to know that if they miss his message, they miss the whole point of following God and preparing the way of the Lord.

How do we prepare the way of the Lord as we anticipate the advent, the coming of God? John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, a double theme that runs throughout scripture. We repent. God forgives. This is symbolized each Sunday through our corporate prayer of confession and the assurance of pardon. Repentance with the expectation of God’s forgiveness. According to John, to prepare the way of the Lord, repentance is critical. Repentance during advent? ‘Tis the season to be jolly, isn’t it? We know that isn’t true for everyone. Repentance? Well, yes. The liturgical color for advent is purple as we see on our stoles, on the communion table, and on advent candles. Purple signifies penitence and royalty, which may say something about the Royal God-child who graciously accepts our repentance. Hope and expectation are usually stressed during advent as well but we shouldn’t forget that holy sorrow is also fitting in this holy season. As the eyes of our hearts turn to God, we repent of what we’ve done and what we have left undone, sins of commission and sins of omission. In the light of his coming, we see ourselves for who we really are in the darkness, thus we repent.

But John takes it one step further. He links the holy sorrow of repentance to holy action. “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” The crowds come out to be baptized, to wade in the water.

But he tells them that the rite of baptism, the rite of cleansing and purification and repentance, is linked to a righteous ethic. He doesn't preach cheap grace—say a prayer of confession, receive assurance of pardon, and then go home to watch football. Rather, John suggests that true repentance is when a repentant life reveals itself through right living and action. “Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor.’”

Don't use Abraham, the religious tradition of the past, as an escape route out of responsibility for your own present action and embodiment of faith. “We have Abraham as our ancestor” as if that will free you to live a fruitless and perhaps reckless life. “We've been worshiping at Duke Chapel ever since it was built.” Don't rely on praise of the past or rote religious activity or the good ole days of mainline Protestantism. Don't rely on past borne fruit that was once fresh and juicy but is now stale and rotten. Don't rely on someone else to bear fruit that only you can bear. Don't rely on someone else's salvation, someone else's piety, someone else's baptismal vows, what they used to do in the church and how they used to run this or that ministry. If you just depend on a religious past (“we have Abraham as our ancestor”), do you know that means? One might assume that weekly attendance at Duke Chapel for worship is the sum total of the expression of one's Christian faith and baptism because the blessing of father Abraham has trickled down into our souls—a distorted belief in trickle down theology.

This faulty overreliance on the faithfulness and fruitfulness of the past is insufficient for John when dealing with baptismal discipleship. Doing this, overreliance on the religious past, is actually doing nothing. “We have Abraham as our ancestor” can be an ecclesial escape mechanism. It's not real repentance. Solely celebrating religious history may lead to perpetual inactivity today. Worse yet, bearing no good fruit of repentance, doing nothing, will lead to a spiritual death. “The axe is lying at the root of the trees” and trees that bear bad fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire, burned up because no good fruit is borne from one's life. Perhaps burned up because we are too comfortable sitting on the Methodist hymnal in a cushy pew or more interested in the glory days of Christianity than the present days of church renewal and innovative mission. John rains down a fire of judgment on do-nothing Christians with his sermon that could be titled “Burn, Baby, Burn.” Isn't John #1 on your list of top biblical preachers!?

But maybe John does not mean that people are not doing anything. Maybe we are doing the wrong thing, bearing bad rotten fruit for the whole world to see. Maybe our very own repentance has ruined us such that we act as if our repentance has made us righteous, even self-righteous, to dichotomize the gospel and the Church into two basic camps: social justice or progressive Christianity on the one hand, and evangelical or conservative Christianity on the other. We can spend more time on determining who's a real Christian or not than on serving the poor and the widow and the orphan and the victims of violence. We can make either side of the Christian aisle look or sound like deadly, venomous spiritual vipers. We do violence to each other through our words and erect easy bipolarities to create Christian camps, us versus them mentalities, and diminish the witness of the very gospel we are called to proclaim. What type of fruit of repentance is that?

As far as I know, there's only one gospel of Jesus Christ and it can't be divided or segregated into our own image and liking. It does not have a split mission or personality; it

merges heaven and earth; transcendence with immanence; divinity wears the clothes of humanity so that the gospel can be touched and heard and smelled and tasted and seen. The baptism of repentance John proclaims is not a spiritual gospel or a social gospel or a conservative gospel or a liberal gospel. It is the gospel, “the good news.” And it is whole and holistic.

John strives for Christian liturgical integrity by linking baptismal repentance with social responsibility, the inner life with the outer life to form an integrative life. There are fruits of repentance, which is why the crowds, who usually get a bad rap, ask the right question, “What should we do?” In other words, how should we live in light of the coming of Christ? How should we prepare? The crowd gets it but I’m not sure if we professional Christians always do. The crowd reveals that baptismal discipleship does something. It requires something from us. Repentance takes us inward but leads us outward into action. “What should we do?” the crowd asks. It’s asked three times to get our attention. It’s a scriptural hymnic refrain—what should we do, what should we do, what should we do. Those human voices from scripture resonate so much that their question becomes ours today—what should we do in this moment of history?

The answers given in today’s passage are very practical, down to earth responses, theology in the flesh, in the world, on the backs, in the mouths, in the pockets of real people. The answers represent the incarnation of our baptismal repentance. What should we do? “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” What should we do? “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” What should we do? “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” Selfless sharing, anti-economic bullying, and being content with what one has. Basically, John says, “don’t be greedy.”

And what I love about this passage is that liturgical rite and repentance are fused with righteous social activism. The gospel is big enough to include both. It is internal and external. It is spiritual and material. Baptismal repentance has everything to do with social and economic justice. Baptism is not just a little sprinkling of water or full immersion in a pool. Baptism is being plunged into a new way of being, living, and acting in the world. Baptismal repentance immerses you into the ethics of Jesus. WWJD. What would Jesus do? That means following Jesus, preparing the way for Jesus, has everything to do with justice. Repentance is connected to service toward others. Your conversion to Christianity, signified in your baptism, converts, literally turns you toward God and your turn to God is also a turn to *the other*. The invisible grace of the sacrament of baptism becomes visible in outward mission. Our baptism, our repentance, is not just for us. There is fruit to be borne for others. We’re baptized to be a blessing to someone else. “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” Our baptism is interlocked with an ethic of generosity. Liturgical historian, James White says it best: “We undertake in baptism a serious responsibility not only for the spiritual welfare but also the material welfare of our fellow members of the body of Christ. The two cannot be separated. The deprivation of our neighbor is a sign of our failure to take our baptism seriously. On the other hand, deeds of love and charity are a form of living out our baptism.”

Repentance includes right social action. Heavenly-minded and earthly good. Spiritually-ignited and socially-engaged. Personal piety and social witness. The liturgy and the liturgy after the liturgy. The song we sing is the song we live. Baptismal water of the Spirit and the work of

the Spirit. Lip service and life service. Christian rhetoric with a Christian ethic. “What should we do?” is a clarion call for Christian integrity this advent season. The gospel requires an ethical performance that aims to end injustices and inequities in society. What should we do?

There’s so much to be done. I’ve been struck recently—and not just due to Friday’s massacre in Connecticut—by what it appears to be incessant incidents of violence or the threat of violence, locally, nationally, and internationally. Knife attack injuring 22 primary school children in China. Oregon mall shootings with its own human victims. Durham prayer vigils for those, young and old, shot dead on our southern streets. Duke Alert emails and texts that report a robbery using a handgun near East campus. Reports of violence against oneself—suicides all across the country. And now this modern day massacre of innocents at a Newtown elementary school calling to mind King Herod’s order to kill all children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under in his evil pursuit of the Christ child when Jesus was born (Matt 2:16ff). A tragic senseless school shooting killing 20 children (ages 6-7) and 6 adult educators. The gunmen’s mother is dead, and the 20 year old gunman himself is dead—he was just a child too. Christmas gifts under trees for little children who will never receive them now. Can you imagine? Such vicious violence that surviving kindergartners were told to line up and cover their eyes as they were led out of the school by police past bodies of their schoolmates. What should we do in the face of all of this violence?

I have more questions than answers, to be honest. Violence and loss of human life in the season of peace and goodwill anticipating the coming of the Prince of Peace who brings life? This is the advent tension between promise and fulfillment that creates a deeper sense of yearning for the coming of Christ and a new heaven and a new earth, where there’ll be no more crying, no more pain, no more mourning. No more senseless shootings. No more suicides, because death will be no more. We’ll study war no more because all things will be made new. And we need ‘new’ right now!

John has every reason to have his tone this morning. He not only sees the disintegration of the world but the disintegration of our Christian life. He’s serious about us doing something for this sin-sick world, that our repentance may not be ruined by inactivity but rather revealed and expressed through action. He doesn’t want us to just be Christians in-a our hearts but also with our hands. That’s why he doesn’t beat around the bush. It’s an urgent advent message that aims to afflict the comfortable. That’s his sermon *telos*. I think he reached his goal.

John proclaims this way, not because he is callous, but because he cares about the integrity of the gospel and our lives. And though one may perceive that the call to action is a burden placed on us through that persistent question, “what should we do?” it is not. That question arises in light of God’s action in Jesus Christ. John calls us to remember God’s initiative. He does not leave us with what we should do but with what God has done. “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming. I’m not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Our generosity, our ethical action through repentance, is viewed in light of God’s generosity in coming to us. “One who is more powerful than I is coming.” God saw our need before we even knew we had a need and look at what God has done. Our doing is not done in our own strength but through the One who has already come and is coming. The One who has already done great things for us. The One who shows us what needs to be done and how it should be done. The One who

prepared the way for us though we talk about preparing the way for him. God's performance of the gospel of love took the form of human flesh so that the Word became flesh. Now that is an integrative life—divinity married to humanity.

God saw that we needed clothes and became clothed in our skin. God saw that we needed food and became daily bread for us. God saw that we were thirsty and poured life-giving blood for us. God knew children were vulnerable to violence and became a vulnerable child himself to save all children from eternal death. What we should do is discovered through what God has done and is doing. A ministry of incarnation.

I wouldn't be honest if I didn't say this. Not everyone will like what you do. Not everyone will agree with what is done. It may even get you into trouble. I have to tell you this because even the Revised Common lectionary committee that decided on the verses to be included for this Sunday did not include verses 19-20 that state Herod threw John in prison. Interesting, isn't it? And we know that Jesus was thrown on a cross. So the whole gospel truth with its spiritual and material reality is not a popular prosperity gospel message. Repentance costs you something. It costs your whole life. That is, if this advent you desire to live with integrity and not in vain.

If I can help somebody  
As I travel along  
If I can help somebody  
With a word or song  
If I can help somebody  
From doing wrong  
My living shall not be in vain.

“As this is done, the gulf between outer and inner will narrow and [our lives] will be increasingly whole and of one piece” because spiritual repentance has grown the fruit of material redemption (Howard Thurman). Wouldn't that be a wonderful gift to give God this advent? Christian integrity.

So what should we do? We've heard three responses from John. And there are so many other things to do. But whatever you decide, for God's sake, for Christ's sake, for your baptism's sake, for the world's sake, for the sake of the poor the helpless, the cold, the hungry, the oppressed, the sick and them that mourn, the lonely and unloved, the aged and the little children, for the sake of each fallen rose, whatever you decide, do something.