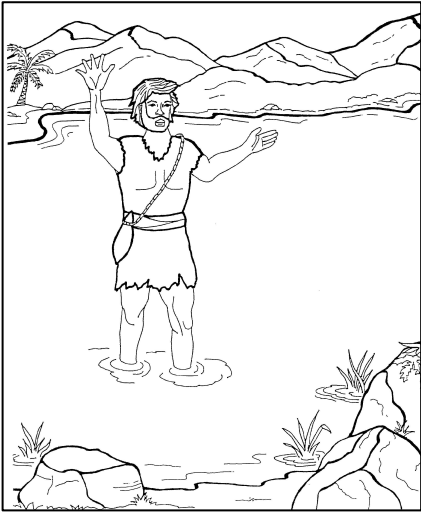


third sunday of advent (gaudete sunday)

Luke 3:10-18

¹⁰ The crowds approached John the Baptist, and asked him, “What then should we do?” ¹¹ In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹² Even tax



collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³ He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

¹⁴ 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.” ¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts

concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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.” ¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

COMMENTARY:

A note about “Gaudete Sunday”: in the liturgical tradition of Roman Catholicism, this Sunday is one of two Sundays (one in Advent, and the other in Lent, called “Laetare Sunday”) when the seasonal purple vestments can yield to the lighter colour of “rose” (=a dusty pink). The name, which is taken from the Latin entrance antiphon for this Mass (“*Gaudete in Domino semper*”; “Rejoice in the Lord always”; Philippians 4:4), conveys a certain attenuation or ‘lessening’ of the more sombre/serious tone of the season, and provides a *prélude* or hint of the coming season of joy and celebration—the brightness of Christmas already begins to “colour” our Advent waiting!

10: Last week, we were formally introduced to the figure of John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus who had taken on the mantle of the ancient Jewish prophets, to proclaim the coming of a new era, when the “winding roads” must be straightened and made ready for God’s imminent arrival. It is clear that the people listening to John have been cut to the heart by his preaching, and are prepared to change their ways, to enter into the process of conversion to which John is calling them. John has portrayed a dramatic scenario about the coming judgement—but, they ask, what concrete actions are an appropriate response to this message? When the Gospel is preached in

all its simple power, it touches people and inspires in them a desire of repentance, a hunger for God and for the forgiveness God alone can offer. Preached with sincerity and conviction, the Gospel challenges people to action, and especially to change in their own lives (and interestingly, v. 18 says that “the Gospel” [Grk *εὐαγγέλιον*; = “good news”] is *precisely* what John is preaching, although it may not necessarily *sound* like “good news” to our ears today!)

11: Perhaps surprisingly to us, John’s first answer is not concerned with religious rituals or prayers, but is on the level of *social justice*: those who have the goods of this earth (clothing, food, money, etc.) are obliged to share them generously with those who are not so fortunate. John’s words are strongly reminiscent of the admonitions of the New Testament letter of James:

James 5 ¹ Well now, you rich! Lament, weep for the miseries that are coming to you.

² Your wealth is rotting, your clothes are all moth-eaten. ³ All your gold and your silver are corroding away, and the same corrosion will be a witness against you and eat into your body. It is like a fire which you have stored up for the final days. ⁴ Can you hear crying out against you the wages which you kept back from the labourers mowing your fields? The cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts. ⁵ On earth you have had a life of comfort and luxury; in the time of slaughter you went on eating to your heart’s content. ⁶ It was you who condemned the upright and killed them; they offered you no resistance. ⁷ Now be patient, brothers [and sisters], until the Lord’s coming. Think of a farmer: how patiently he waits for the precious fruit of the ground until it has had the autumn rains and the spring rains! ⁸ You too must be patient; do not lose heart, because the Lord’s coming will be soon.

John’s message seems to be that there is no true conversion without a change in one’s way of life, and a commitment to share one’s possessions as generously as possible with those in need. Repentance that remains purely on the level of thoughts and good intentions is not what Christianity demands. This focus on repentance-expressed-through-actions is thoroughly Jewish, summed up in the concept of *tzedakah* (literally, “righteousness”), by which true religiosity must be demonstrated in concrete deeds, especially toward the poor and needy. It is worth noting that, while some scholars have connected John with the Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls) community, he (unlike the Qumran commune) does not expect people to undertake a life of isolation, extreme asceticism and prayer. His answers presuppose that people will return to their everyday lives and continue in their occupations.

John’s answer also summons us to a profound sensitivity to those around us. If we are to *give* to those who have no coat and no food, then we must first allow our eyes and hearts to be opened to *notice* them, which is where we often fail, especially in the increasingly busy world we live in.

“two coats”: the Greek noun used here, *χιτώων* (*chitôn*) was “a long garment worn under the cloak, next to the skin” (NET Bible notes). Some versions render this word as “tunic,” although, as the NET Bible admits, “most modern readers would not understand what a ‘tunic’ was any more than they would be familiar with a ‘chiton.’” On the other hand, attempts to find a modern equivalent are also a problem: ‘shirt’ conveys the idea of a much shorter garment that covers only the upper body, and ‘undergarment’ (given the styles of modern underwear) is more misleading still.” In length, it would be roughly the equivalent of a modern nightshirt; worn by both men and women, it reached to mid-calf, and was sleeveless.

12-14: “Even tax collectors came”: the very wording of this phrase seems to express shock at the fact that tax-collectors (who were often considered as the worst sinners, since they collaborated with the Romans in “fleecing” their own fellow citizens, often at exorbitant rates) would be

attracted to John's message, and interested in the extremely challenging moral standards he is proposing. And yet, Luke seems to be underscoring that *no one*, not even the hated tax-collectors, is beyond repentance¹; they seek baptism as a sign of repentance, and address John with the respectful title of "Teacher," seeing in him a religious authority worthy of their attention.

John's command to them ("Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you")² is a direct challenge to the prevailing practices of Middle Eastern tax-collectors, who bid with the Roman authorities for these lucrative contracts; once they had collected the officially required amount, their superiors often turned a blind eye if the tax-collectors extorted further monies from people, to line their own pockets. Needless to say, it was often the poorest and weakest who had the most to lose from them, and several ancient writers castigate the heartlessness and greed for which tax-collectors were known.

Similarly, soldiers were widely hated and resented in Palestinian Judaism, as agents imposing Roman rule, often by force. The authority wielded by a Roman soldier meant that soldiers sometimes abused their power, extorting money from people by threats of violence; the verb used for "extort" (*διασειω*, *diaseiō*) literally refers to "shaking someone violently"—a particularly graphic image of what some soldiers apparently did. Many of them would probably also have been *foreigners* (perhaps largely Syrians?), and would therefore have been religious and ethnic "outsiders" as well. Given the Roman system of justice, soldiers could make false allegations against people to put pressure on them to pay bribes, knowing that Roman courts would be much more inclined to believe a soldier's word than that of a Jew.

The essence of the Baptist's teaching is applicable to everyone, even today: whatever your work is, do it *faithfully*, *ethically* and *responsibly*, not using your position for personal gain or advantage. Do not look for "loopholes" that would allow you to exploit others, and do not seek more than is your due. Do not allow yourself to think of your work in purely economic terms, but perform it competently, generously and with humility, as a service to others, and never for self-aggrandizement or power.

15: "the people were filled with expectation³, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah": Modern study of messianic ideas in ancient Judaism seems to suggest that, the more brutal and oppressive the people's life became, the more in earnest did they long for the coming of the Messiah, and the more acute was their sense of expectation. Certainly, the time of John was not a "high point" in ancient Judaism, either politically or religiously; Judæa and Jerusalem were once again under direct Roman rule, and the established Aaronic priesthood had died out long before, to be replaced by individuals who were often more concerned about collaborating with the Roman governor than with their specifically *religious* role. The two key institutions of Biblical Judaism—the priesthood and the kingship—had both failed in different ways, and were now mere shadows of their earlier status. Under the Romans (and the Herods), people suffered an often-crushing burden of taxes, and much of Israel's agricultural produce was exported for the benefit of other parts of the Empire,

¹ As we will see throughout this liturgical year, this is a consistent theme of Luke's Gospel in particular: it is the unexpected, those apparently "beyond the pale," who will be welcomed by Jesus, and who will embrace His message with enthusiasm and faith.

² In the Greek, the expression "no more" is emphatic, as if John is trying to really hammer home his point.

³ The term "filled with expectation" (Grk *προσδοκαω*, *prosdokaō*) can also be translated "were living in suspense," "were watching eagerly for" or "were looking forward to"—"with an added element of tension arising from hope or fear" (Friberg *Greek Lexicon*)

rather than for domestic consumption. Many Jews had been sent to Rome as slaves, and those who had attempted to defy the Romans and re-establish Jewish independence had been harshly punished and executed. And yet, rabbinic tradition said that times of great suffering and oppression would, in fact, be indicators of the “footsteps of the Messiah”—that, in a sense, things would be “darkest just before the dawn”. The worse the situation became, the more people were convinced that the time of their deliverance—the time of the Messiah—could not be far off. Many devout Jews were eagerly looking for signs that the Messianic Age was imminent. John’s words, actions and appearance were enough for many people to suspect that he was at least the Messiah’s “herald,” if not the Messiah himself. And yet there were doubts, for his public pronouncements did not seem to have the *revolutionary* political character that many associated with the Messiah, as the one who would overturn the *status quo*, and return Israel to a time of glory, peace and prominence, when religion and politics would be purified once more as God had meant them to be, so that the Jews would no longer live in subjugation to foreign powers, and could engage freely in the task for which God had created them: study and practice of the *Torah* (God’s teachings).

16: “I baptize you with water”: the personal pronoun “I” is emphatic here (as is “he” a few words further on), to contrast John’s status and that of the “one who is coming”⁴.

“one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals”: “The humility of John is evident in the statement *I am not worthy*. This was considered one of the least worthy tasks of a slave, and John did not consider himself worthy to do even that for the one to come, despite the fact he himself was a prophet!” (NET Bible notes)

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire”: “There are differing interpretations for this phrase regarding the number of baptisms and their nature. (1) Some see one baptism here, and this can be divided further into two options. (a) The baptism of *the Holy Spirit and fire* could refer to the cleansing, purifying work of the Spirit in the individual believer through salvation and sanctification, or (b) it could refer to *two different results* of Christ’s ministry: Some accept Christ and are baptized with the Holy Spirit, but some reject him and receive judgment. (2) Other interpreters see *two baptisms* here: The baptism of the *Holy Spirit* refers to the salvation Jesus brings at his first advent, in which believers receive the Holy Spirit, and the baptism of *fire* refers to the judgment Jesus will bring upon the world at his second coming. One must take into account both the image of fire and whether individual or corporate baptism is in view. A decision is not easy on either issue. The image of fire is used to refer to both eternal judgment (e.g., Matt 25:41) and the power of the Lord’s presence to purge and cleanse his people (e.g., Isa 4:4-5). The pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, a fulfillment of this prophecy no matter which interpretation is taken, had both individual and corporate dimensions. It is possible that since *Holy Spirit and fire* are governed by a single preposition in Greek, the one-baptism view may be more likely, but this is not certain. Simply put, there is no consensus view in scholarship at this time on the best interpretation of this passage.” (NET Bible notes)

“Some commentators see this as a purifying fire that will eliminate the wicked from the Jewish people, along lines set forth in Malachi 3:19-21 (4:1-3) and Psalm 1:6 (‘The way of the wicked will perish’) ... The same psalm also compares the ungodly with straw (1:4). Others take it as enthusiasm for holiness, being on fire for God” (David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, p. 20).

⁴ Some early manuscripts add “for repentance” here; “Although two of the manuscripts in support are early and important, it is an obviously motivated reading to add clarification, probably representing a copyist’s attempt to harmonize Luke’s version with Matt 3:11” (NET Bible notes).

17: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor...”: even today in many developing countries, the process of separating the edible wheat-grains from their protective husk is done manually. The wheat is placed on a flat surface, where it is “threshed,” either with a type of whip/flail, or a threshing sledge (a type of ‘sled’ with sharp teeth underneath). These instruments break open the unusable external chaff, exposing the grain inside. When the threshing process is complete, the mixture would be thrown up into the air with a threshing fork (a cross between a shovel and pitchfork), so that the wind can carry away the lighter chaff, while the heavier, edible wheat-grains fall back to earth. It is a slow, labour-intensive process, but it has been used for millennia in many countries, and continues to be used today. John makes use of this agricultural image—well-known to many of his listeners from the fertile farming areas of Galilee—to portray God’s final judgement of humanity which, John says, is rapidly approaching.

“...to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”: whereas the wheat was valuable for food (and as a commodity for sale or barter), the chaff served little purpose, except to be used as kindling for starting fires. The good wheat is an obvious symbol of the righteous, whereas the wicked are described in the symbolism of the chaff—the “unquenchable fire” probably alluding to the Biblical concept of “Gehenna”⁵—a place of eternal torment for the wicked who are condemned by God.

18: “with many other exhortations”: the term translated “exhortations” is actually a form of the Greek verb *παρακαλεω* (*parakaleô*), which (especially in John’s Gospel) describes the role (Paraclete) that the Holy Spirit performed. “Exhortation” is certainly one possible translation, but the term also often includes nuances of “comforting, encouraging, cheering someone up, interceding on someone’s behalf”. Not only is John “exhorting” the crowds (in a rhetorical-moral sense), but he is also *comforting and encouraging* them (in a spiritual-emotional sense), with the promise that their present experience of suffering, injustice and oppression is about to yield to a new reality, when God will correct all that is wrong with the world, once and for all. It is in this sense that Luke says “John proclaimed *the Good News* [=Gospel] to the people”. For those caught in the midst of such hardships, tempted to despair and cynicism, John’s message of the coming judgement and reversal would have ignited a spark of new hope in the hearts of many who were becoming discouraged, wondering if God would ever intervene. Despite the harshness of John’s imagery, for many people, his message was, indeed, “good news”.

⁵ *Gehenna*: taken from the Hebrew *Gê Hinnom*, “Hinnom Valley,” this was an area to the south-west of Jerusalem which had, in pagan times, been the location where babies were burned alive as sacrifices to the Canaanite god Molech. As a “cursed” site, it later became Jerusalem’s garbage dump, where a fire was kept perpetually burning, to consume the city’s rubbish output. Both the concept of an unquenchable fire, and the awful smell emanating from this spot, combined in the people’s imagination to capture the eternal punishment of human beings who are permanently separated from God after death on account of their sinfulness.