

“A Call to Readiness”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Luke 3:7-14,18

Richard E. Otty
December 13, 2015
Third Advent

Last Sunday, the messenger John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus. This week, as I previewed, John will call his audience a “Brood of vipers!” Yet, in truth, the hellfire tone diminishes quickly. Unlike Matthew, where the harsh words are aimed at the religious elite, in Luke, John’s audience is what we would call “ordinary folk,” civil servant tax collectors and likely mercenary soldiers. Later in Luke, we will find Jesus sitting and eating with these same people.

John has emerged from the wilderness as the messenger. A crowd has gathered at the Jordan, and he offers them a message of repentance to ready themselves for the one who is to come. We will hear his quite practical answers to their questions about what it means to repent.

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,

ALL: “What then should we do?”

In reply John 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,

WOMEN: “Teacher, what should we do?”

He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him,

MEN: “And we, what should we do?”

John said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

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

So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people. We usually think of good news coming from the mouth of Jesus. Luke throws off our rough and tumble, repentance-filled, judgment-laced images we have of John and tells us the Baptist’s exhortations are good news. We are challenged to concur and consider our own preparations for Messiah.

We know about preparing. It is a focus of this season. The question of the month is, “Are you ready for Christmas?” Of course, ask that of a pastor or church’s director of music, and the response will not be about gift buying or cookie baking, but whether sermons or choirs are ready.

While most of the world's citizens live day to day, most of us have the privilege and time to be preparers. We either have planned or are planning for our retirement years, whether they will be in a year or two, or are still a decade or more away. A part of that preparation is about money, but retirement seminars also help us ponder what it will be like not to go to work each day; particularly important if one's identity is lodged in one's work.

We prepare for medical procedures and surgeries, though if a surgeon asks, "Are you ready?" we might be tempted to reply, "Are you ready?"

We prepare for company – family and friends – sometimes for a weeklong stay, but also for just a dinner or day visit. We are asked, "Are you ready for your guests?"

Students are asked, "Are you ready for college – or grad school?," and upon graduation that inane question, "Are you ready for the real world?" It would be appropriate to respond, "To which real world are you referring?"

We know being ready is more than the physical dusting of tables or cleaning of the guest bathroom. There is more than simply fasting before surgery, or purchasing furnishings for a dorm room. There is also the mental and emotional preparation involved to receive the guest, to have our body worked on, to begin one's studies with an eye to one's future that may now be unclear.

Our physical preparations can consume our time and energy. We know that when someone asks, "Are you ready?," and our response is, "I'll just be glad when it is over." Preparing can exhaust us, and even if we make it through the visit, the surgery, the move, we may collapse at the other end. At that point, we might say, "I took on too much, and I deserve some rest, or a vacation."

When that happens, what sneaks into our lives is an attitude of entitlement. Particularly at times of physical or emotional exhaustion, the word "deserve" enters our vocabulary. We know it will be very well-received when we say to another, "You deserve it..." , whether the "it" be time off, a raise, an end of suffering. We say or may have said to us, "You deserve it..."

... after all you have been through."

... after all the work you have done."

... after all those years of study."

... after all you have given to the church. You deserve it..."

... after being a member of that group or church for so long."

Sometimes we just say, "You deserve it...at your age!"

The "it" of what is deserved is usually a granting of permission to be more indulgent than one's normal sense of ethics, guilt or propriety might otherwise allow. When we are the recipient of the "You deserve it..." affirmation, it is easy to begin to think, "You know, I guess I do deserve it."

I do need to be cautious at this point, for I do not want to in any way diminish the critical need for self-care. Caregivers are particularly vulnerable to becoming worn down. We recall Jesus would go out to pray alone, early in the morning, even when people were seeking him to heal and urging him to teach; just so, we are to understand our own need to balance obligations and rest.

Yet, there is a difference between our need to keep our spirits refreshed, and the “deservings” we self-confer or claim upon ourselves. I have recognized times in my own life when I found myself thinking, “I deserve it,” but I knew the “it” was self-indulgence, not self-care. Sometimes, this sense of entitlement comes from our resentment that others did not do their share, and we deserve a reward for doing ours.

When we take on the attitude of entitlement, of being deserving, we risk becoming culturally captive to a material view of life whereby we are told that what we buy, or where we fly, or that expensive meal will bring us new life. It is from such a cultural captivity John seeks to free us, so we are ready for God’s promise.

John calls his hearers to prepare for the one to come by bearing fruits worthy of repentance. He knows some have claimed their ancestry back to Abraham automatically entitles them to special privilege. John erases any notion that your heritage or family tree, or how long you have been a member of the church, or how much you have done in the church, or how hard you have worked, exempts you from the call to repentance.

After hearing his call for repentance, three groups approach John with the question, “What shall we do?” John’s answer can be summarized in the phrase: “Behave well!” In fact, John’s teaching is not all that radical, but he does call for people to set aside attitudes of entitlement or privilege, and those sometimes subtle ways in which we indulge because we have been told we are deserving.

“What shall we do?” To the crowd, some of whom may have felt justified in having two coats, John says, as long as there is anyone in this community who does not have one coat, then you have one too many. Give it away.

To the tax collectors, who could easily have used the “everyone does it” rationalization to skim a little extra from folks, John says, stop. Just stop.

To the soldiers, who could use the excuse of low wages to justify using their power to threaten and extort, John says, be satisfied with what you receive.

As one has written, “John essentially tells the general crowd to share, the tax collectors to be fair, and the soldiers not to bully.” [David Lose, *Journal for Preachers, Advent 2015*, p. 12]

John’s call for repentance is not to give up everything one has, or to change one’s vocation, or move from one’s house. Jesus will call his followers to do all those things. To prepare for Jesus, John uplifts honesty and integrity, generosity and unselfishness, hospitality and fairness. If and when we find ourselves compromising any one of these, we need a dose of John’s repentance, who will point out how we have become captive to the easily digestible, self-serving, “I deserve it” diet of entitlement.

While offered under the guise of repentance, John’s exhortations are good news because for they are meant to ready us for the one named the “dayspring,” meaning the “dawn,” about whom his father Zechariah prophesied at his son’s circumcision:

By the tender mercy of our God, the dayspring from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

The Advent carol, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” echoes this vision of hope for which we are to be ready:

*“O come, thou dayspring come and cheer our spirits by thine Advent here.
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death’s dark shadows put to flight.”*

To be ready for the one to follow, to be ready for the Christ whose birth we anticipate, John calls for us to repent, to turn away from anything that lessens our ability to fully know, and make known, the joy of God's promised dayspring. In so doing, John invites us "into the divine drama of God's redemption of the world by calling [us] to be stewards of God's goodness and mercy." [Lose, ibid.]

Stewards of God's goodness and mercy. As we dedicate our stewardship commitments of money this morning, we do well to link them to our stewardship of God's goodness and mercy. We have been entrusted with God's promise of "dayspring." There are many voices calling us to abandon the dayspring of peace and protect ourselves, or to sort out peoples or religions and claim a special entitlement of privilege.

John's message to the common folks is to not give in to such voices, not to succumb to easy answers, but to say we are ready to hold fast to God's hope and promise for the world. We trust John that it is within our reach and ability to be faithful stewards of God's goodness and mercy, not in some distant future, but today.