Let us pray: *Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen. (BCP, 212)*

Several weeks ago I remarked that the Collect—the prayer—for the Day was one of Episcopalians’ favorites . . . you remember, that prayer about “reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting” Holy Scripture. That prayer made it through the revision of the 1928 Prayer Book to the red book that’s in your pews. There were other favorites, however, that didn’t quite survive unscathed — mostly due to changes in the meanings of words. One of those (again, one that made many older Episcopalians smile) was the Collect for the Seventeenth Sunday After Trinity Sunday: *“LORD, we pray thee that thy grace may always prevent and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works.”* (p. 213). Questions always arose, during those Prayer Book revision days, about whether or not we wanted God’s grace to prevent us from doing good works. The reference, however, was to a particular theological idea, known as “prevenient grace” — that is, that God’s grace goes before us to lead us to good works. “Prevenient” morphs into “prevent”. That Collect is still found in the 1979 Prayer Book,, but it has been re-written: *“LORD, we pray that thy grace may always precede and follow us . . .”* (p. 183).

The Collect for today has its fan-base too, and has similarly gone through some revision. “Stir-up Sunday” used to be the last Sunday before Advent (and was, in the minds of many folks, the day for stirring up, and making, Christmas Pudding, which took several weeks to “cure”!). But we learned a few weeks ago of the change in the Church’s calendar to observe that last-Sunday-before-Advent as the Feast of Christ the King. So a different Sunday needed to be “stirred up”. Not only, however, was the Sunday changed, but so were some of the words. In the ’28 Book, what was to be agitated were “the wills of [God’s] faithful people”. To what
end? “That [the faithful], plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by [God] be plenteously rewarded” (p. 225). What we heard today, though, was that it was God’s power that was to be stirred up, in order that it might come among us to help and deliver us (p. 160). While I find that an interesting shift in focus — from a “reward-based”, almost “self-help”, theology to a “deliverance-based” theology, the suggestion in the current version is that we REALLY need help because we are “sorely hindered by our sins”.

Being “sorely hindered by their sins” may not have been high on the list of reasons that those folks went out to see John the Baptist in the wilderness. Certainly John was preaching about forgiveness of sins (we heard that last week), and that in-and-of-itself was a pretty attractive proposition—to have their past errors and mis-steps forgiven. John, however, seemed to intuit that the crowd thought baptism was a simple “washing away”, and he quickly put that idea to rest! Their heads would have snapped around at being addressed by John as a “brood of vipers”! Having their full attention, he then expanded on what a “baptism of repentance” implied, that is, “bearing fruits worthy of repentance” (Lk 3.8).

But what did that mean? It would appear that John’s audience felt that their heritage, as children of Abraham, would be sufficient to see them through. Certainly, as heirs of Abraham, part of their inheritance was the Law, the guidebook for behavior. And it was pretty clear in its six-hundred-plus laws about what to do, and what not to do. So, it seems, given John’s caution about not claiming heritage as a refuge, that there was something more that might be required. Indeed, the people themselves seem to know that just following the Law wasn’t sufficient.

“What must we do, then?” they asked. They had become so conditioned by their culture and circumstances that they were unable to imagine what “fruit worthy of repentance” might look like; it’s as if they felt trapped within a system. They wanted more concrete answers to their specific, concrete, situations. John seemed to “get it” and responded to them all: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise” (11). A paraphrase of this still lives on in the Habitat for Humanity world: “Everyone has one before anyone has two”. The short answer John gave to their question was one that could be found in that book All I Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten: “Share!”
While those instructions were addressed to everyone, John also dealt with more specific groups within his audience. Tax collectors, in those days, often were Jews, who became contract employees of the government. This collusion was seen as bad enough in the eyes of other Jews, leading them to be lumped together with other “sinners”. But there was more! They made their living by tacking on a certain allowable percentage to the legally required tax. But this system was ripe for abuse, and some clearly took more than the amount to which they were entitled, perhaps taking advantage of the gullible. Their “fruit worthy of repentance,” John declares, was to: “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you” (13).

Who the soldiers were is unclear. Some commentators suspect, since they came out to John to be baptized, that they weren’t Roman soldiers, but rather Jewish, perhaps temple guards. And, it would appear, that they were not particularly well-paid. Their salary level aside, however, their status also allowed for an abuse of power. Similar to his instructions about the “fruit” the tax-collectors should bear, John’s answer to them was: “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages” (14).

Again, it was as if they were trapped in a system that held little hope, yet it was hope they really wanted! And they saw that in John’s overall message. That’s why they went out to see him. We get a glimpse of that hope in the reading from Luke as well — they wondered if he was the hoped-for Messiah! But if he was, their underlying questions was how would they participate in the new world? Yes, they could go through the motions of repentance, that is, getting baptized. But they sensed that there clearly had to be more; they just didn’t see a road to the future for themselves. John’s answers gave them hope, and his guidance wasn’t particularly difficult. He didn’t tell them to “take the shirt off your back”. He didn’t tell them not to require and accept payment. His exhortation was simple: to use another semi-current slogan: “Live simply, so that others may simply live.”

While “Live simply, so that others may simply live” may not be one of our rallying cries (although I might wonder, “Why not?”), I suspect that many of us, especially in these days heading up to Christmas, might, deep down, hope for a less consumeristic society. Yet, we, too, can feel trapped. I recall — maybe some of you will as well — the annual eagerness for the Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Wards Christmas catalogs. I would spend hours, laying on the floor in front of a fire, pouring through them, folding down page-corners and marking items, so I knew what to ask Santa, or my parents. These early memories, and habits, are so
strongly engrained in me that, now, when someone asks me for my Christmas list, I almost have to work to fill it out! I’m trapped in a system that makes me “want” when I’m already satisfied! And, just to be clear, these days, the absence of those catalogs is more than made up for by the targeted ads on Google and Facebook — so those growing up today are equally being indoctrinated into the “I don’t need it, but I want it” sin-filled world in which I was raised.

I can so easily see myself in that crowd surrounding John the Baptist, desperately wanting hope in a crazy world, seeing a hint of it in his message, and then crying with them, “What must we do then?” And I see myself holding close the Collect for today: “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us”. That must be our prayer, our supplication: “What must we do? We are hindered! We are trapped! We need God’s grace stirred up to help us!” And John’s answer resonates for me: “Wish for . . . hope for . . . just enough for yourself. Wish for . . . hope for . . . and endeavor, so that others may have what you already do.”

This Third Sunday of Advent is is also known as “Gaudete”, or “Rejoice”, Sunday. Marked visually by the lighting of the pink candle, the theme of “joy” is central to the other three readings we heard this morning, and could be the topic of another entire sermon. Maybe next year . . . But there is a tie-in with the theme of repentance. My suspicion is that John’s audience was able to rejoice in the possibilities of new life. Their imaginations and wills were “stirred up” by his concrete suggestions on how to escape the traps that held them. I have no doubt that they found his exhortations as difficult to follow was we might. But the joyful Good News — proclaimed by both John and Jesus — was that there is a new life being offered to us, if we’re willing to work to bring it to fruition. We have been forgiven; there is hope. Rejoice!

“LORD, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works.” May your power be stirred up to help those of us hindered by the subtle traps of this world to recognize them for what they are, with your help to escape them, and, in and with your strength, lead others to freedom, peace, and joy.

Amen.