

Luke 3:7-18

<sup>7</sup>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?" <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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."

<sup>10</sup>And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" <sup>11</sup>In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

<sup>12</sup>Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" <sup>13</sup>He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." <sup>14</sup>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."

<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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."

<sup>18</sup>So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” What happened to “peace on earth and good will to all”? Whoa! John the Baptizer sounds ticked and indignant, and ready to label and denigrate all those who don’t think and act like he does. So much for civil discourse, something many of us say that our common good needs. John the Baptizer would seem to fit right into the fray of our political climate, where extremists on both sides castigate, denigrate, and even demonize those who believe differently than they do. Whatever happened to “peace on earth and good will to all”? “Brood of vipers,” “wrath to come,” cutting down and throwing “into the fire,” burning with unquenchable fire” – wow! “So he proclaimed the *good* news to the people”? Well, if that’s John’s good news, I’d sure hate to hear the bad news, wouldn’t you?

John’s words are dire and harsh because the times were tough and alarming for faith; and John sounds like he’s had it...because John believes God has had it, and will soon be coming down here to straighten things out. For when it comes to faith, too many people have for too long just been going through the motions of a religious or a spiritual life that admires God, while having no compunction to follow the ways of God. That ever happen to you? You go through all the religious motions and notions of admiring God, but with no real plan to have to follow the ways of God... And more, you hope that if you just keep going through the proper motions of admiring God, it will actually get you off the hook of having to follow those tough ways of God’s justice, mercy, and righteousness. John’s had it with the priests, the

leaders, and the relatively affluent who have developed a lifestyle of going through the motions of admiring God, so that they could evade having actually to follow God in mercy, justice, and righteousness. “We’re here to cheer you on, God! (But please don’t ask us to do the campaign work...)” Yeah, John’s had it with that kind of spirituality, so flowery in its show of admiration but so devoid of fruit in its service. And so John sounds like the Grinch who’s out to steal Christmas because the holiday season can be so full of gifting ourselves rather than those in need, and of proudly keeping Christ in the word “Christmas” rather than in the way of our life. Yeah, John’s had it with that kind of spirituality, so flowery in its show of admiration but so devoid of any real fruit in its service.

But guess who listens to John, and are drawn to his voice as “divine wisdom from the lunatic fringe”?<sup>1</sup> All those people who cannot make a show of admiring God because their life is already such a mess! Out there in the Judean wilderness, John’s audience is made up of what in his day were the riff-raff, the blood-suckers, and the thugs. They are drawn to John’s harsh words even and especially about them! ...The riff-raff, the poor who detest yet envy the rich they have to look to for charity. ...The blood-suckers, the tax collectors who profit from the shame and pornography that is Roman rule. ...And the thugs, the low-paid grunts who rough others up, trash others’ lives, and show no shame in order to pad their own lean pockets. These people hear John. John’s words strike a chord with these people, who cannot pretend to make a show of admiring God because their lives are already such a despised mess. John’s words ignite in them the fire for change and the spirit of reform. And right when we think it might be a fire and a spirit to change the way the world is, John tells them it’s a fire and a spirit to “change the way *you* are.”

To the poor, who probably had only 2 coats or shirts (one reserved for the Sabbath) and precious little food already, it’s the Spirit to share: “Don’t wait for the rich to give you the money or for the money of being rich; right now God gives you the Spirit to share even in your poverty.” To the tax collectors, it’s the Spirit to forgo the windfall: “Quit gouging; right now God gives you the Spirit to give fairness and justice the chance, even in a world that turns by taking advantage and as much as one can.” And to the poorly paid grunts in the military, it’s the Spirit of peace and contentment: “Stop using your force to bully for you jollies or to extort money for your pockets; right now God gives you the power to keep the peace and to be content with what you have.”

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1. Daniel B. Clendenin, Ph.D. in *The Journey with Jesus: an Invitation to the Ancient Story* © 2009.

It's remarkable, really. Everybody feels that the world is unfair and out to get them; everybody wants the world to change, and so everybody waits for *the world* to change. But John the baptizer is not out there to change the world; he's out there with the Spirit to change *you and me* instead. John the baptizer is not out there to make the world a changed place for us to live and work; John is out there to make us *changed people* right where we live and work in this world.

Those tax collectors and soldiers were despised for the jobs they had, and for some very good reasons. But even then, John does not tell them to leave their jobs, but to do their jobs as changed – Holy Spirited – people. And isn't the timing ironic? In a few weeks how many of us will probably be opening a gift to get another new shirt or coat? And how many of us, with goodies and sweets galore, will probably overeat during the upcoming holidays? What do I mean "will overeat"? I'm there already. But right as we're the ones getting new clothes that we don't really need, John is out there demanding that we be giving clothes to those in real need.

And right when we're consuming too much, John is in our face and demanding that we be dishing it out to those whose bowls are empty. And right at the time of year when we are craving the "more" of bonuses and raises and increases in what we can *take* home, John admonishes us to be content with what we're making already. I mean, how many of us stay satisfied with our wages? That's almost un-American!

John is out there with a Word that is so fiery, gruff and counter-holiday that the timing could hardly be more ironic. So John is out there as the Grinch who'd steal the Christmas holiday because he knows there's a Holy Day of Christ for you and me. John is out there – divine wisdom on the lunatic fringe. John is out there...and he's calling you and me. Is this your time to be "out there"? Is it my time to be "out there," beyond admiring God, and steppin' out to follow my Christ?

John the baptizer is the Grinch who steals a Christmas holiday, in order to redeem a holy Day of the Lord for your life and mine. I really don't think God cares all that much whether Christ is in "Christmas"; I believe God cares about whether you and I are in Christ. I really don't think God cares all that much for the changing of the year; I believe God cares that you and I be changed, Holy-Spirited people in these times. I really don't think God cares how many people find a way to admire the Christ who comes; I believe God cares whether you follow in the way of Christ who *goes*...to find the lost, love the least, and embrace the forlorn. People do not need a changed world *as much as the world needs changed people*.

And because Christ comes, that's our mission, to be the changed people the world ever needs: the people who, even when it's all so inadequate, still just give; the people who, even when life has been so unfair and merciless, still show mercy and do justice; the people of God who, even when their own life is so vulnerable and threatened, still guard life right in the face of careening death.

...John the Baptizer, so "out there," beyond waiting for the world to change, and so fiery with the Spirit of the coming Christ who changes you and me.

"So...he proclaimed the good news to the people."