

Luke 3:7-18 (NRSV)

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, "What then should we do?" In reply he 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, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 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." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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. 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." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday, we had a wonderful celebration here. We were celebrating the opening of the North Wing, a little prematurely, as it turns out, but with lots of joy and thanksgiving anyway. We had honored guests, the Bishop, we had Glenn Wolfgang acting like John

the Baptist, we had a procession of youngsters waving streamers. Kim Berche and her workers converted the nave into the site of a wonderful feast and many of us got to see the North Wing for the first time. We had music and speeches and a slide show. It was wonderful! Thanks so much for everyone who participated in the planning or the doing or both!

Well, this week marks our return to the real world. And the question the people are asking John the Baptizer is, “How shall we live?” It’s a question we might be asking ourselves as well. Not, “How shall we celebrate?” We’ve shown we can do that, and do it well. But, how shall we live? And if last week’s celebration was enchanting – and it was! – then this week’s Gospel, this week’s Good News, at first seems a little disenchanting.

The disenchantment begins with John’s first words to the crowds – “You brood of vipers!” he says. This is not the approved pastoral introduction to baptismal planning. If I started this way with new families who are planning a baptism, I’m not sure we’d have very many baptisms. “Bear fruits worthy of repentance” – literally, do as much good as the evil you need to turn away from. Don’t think that who your ancestors are cuts any ice with me or with God. And then the crowd asks the question, the most important question, the question that, when we get serious, when we get specific, when we get down to brass tacks, we all need to ask, “What should we do?”

Now, the language translates a little better as “What should we produce?” Remember John began by urging the crowd to “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” What fruits should we bear? What fruits would do as much good as the evil we have done?

And then John the Baptizer, who began by sounding like a wild man, John begins to sound almost reasonable. To the tax collectors he says, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” You see, the way tax collectors made money was by collecting more than required and keeping the difference. To soldiers he says, “Don’t

extort money, be satisfied with your wages.” You see, soldiers made a little extra by threats and blackmail. John gives specific advice that speaks to each disciple in his or her particular situation. If you have two coats, give one away. If you have enough food, share with those who don’t. People need food. People need clothes. You have them, share them.”

I’ll confess that this passage, this conversation with John the Baptist was in the back of my mind when we started talking about the marks of discipleship – to “Love God, Love Others, Teach and Learn and Serve the World.” The people of God deserve to be guided specifically, to be guided personally, to be guided in a way that is relevant. When we ask, “How should I live?” we deserve at least the beginnings of an answer. Because that question, “How should I live?” is the most important question that we can ask. Not so much, what should I believe? Not so much, “Who goes to heaven?” Not so much is it better to say “Debts” or “Trespases.” But, rather, how should I live?

How should I live? You have been freed to love God, to love others, to teach and learn and to serve the world – you have been freed for worship and fellowship, education and service. Which you do and how you do them depends on your own particular gifts.

I’m reading a book that the Book Club read some time ago – The Year of Living Biblically. In this book, the author tries to live literally in line with all of the 613 rules of the Bible, the “thou shalt” and the “thou shalt not.” This gets him into some pretty strange situations. He can’t shave or gossip or lie, he learns about how not to mix linen and cotton in his wardrobe and how to leave money at ATMs as a way of honoring the commandment to leave gleanings in the field.

But the interesting thing is that John doesn’t demand this. John doesn’t ask that his disciples follow every command in the Bible. In fact he doesn’t ask them to do anything we might call religious. He

doesn't ask them to believe anything, or worship any particular way, to pray three times a day or even to read the Bible. He simply asks them to avoid greed and to share what they have and be satisfied with their wages.

Now soldiers are told a different thing than tax collectors. Each is asked to do something unique to their particular gifts. I wonder if we should ask ourselves, "What should pastors do?" "What should teachers do?" "What should government contractors do?" "What should health care workers do?" Would we live differently? Maybe, a little.

But let me get back to my main point – this week, after the festivities and the celebrations are over, we ask the question that the people ask John the Baptizer – how shall we live? What should we do? What fruits should we bear? We've been to the mountaintop, we've seen the entertainment, in some cases we've *been* the entertainment. The magic is done, the enchantment is over. Now we're back to the world – how should we live?

Yesterday, a bunch of our teenagers raised some money for furnishing their space in the North Wing by babysitting. They seemed to have a really good time, but the truth is most of these kids are so good-hearted that they have a good time practically no matter what they are doing. Their enchantment doesn't come from festivities or from celebrations but from their relationships with each other and with a living God who is never really absent from their lives.

And I also saw a set of grownups who were moving things out of the trailers and into the North Wing, and they seemed to be having a good time as well, laughing and joking and carrying on.

The Old Testament reading from Zephaniah says it well – sing aloud, O Zion, don't be afraid, don't let your hands grow weak, the

Lord your God is in your midst, he will renew you with his love, just as on the day of festival.

This third Sunday of Advent is called Gaudete Sunday, literally, “Rejoice” Sunday, because we are called to rejoice on this Sunday. So we light the pink candle and we look to re-enchant this delightful season of waiting in hope.

How should we live? We should live without greed and without fear, with joy and with hope. Not the sort of advice we expect from John the Baptizer. But good advice nonetheless. Amen.