

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent
December 12, 2021 Yr C
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath
Gospel: Luke 3:7-18

Living across the street from the Christmas Festival, it was easy to get pulled into the idea that Christmas has arrived. Although blaring Christmas music right across from Holmes House at 8 in the morning doesn't necessarily put me in the Christmas spirit.

We've had Christmas decorations in our stores since Halloween and Black Friday is now Black Friday week – the not so subtle messages that if you don't shop now, your Christmas will be "less than". Many people have told me that they had put up Christmas trees before Thanksgiving, just because the year had been so awful. We will do anything to forget the bad times, we will harken back to memories that we have imagined our childhood lives were like 50 or 60 years ago – as though we lived in a German Christmas Markets with gingerbread and hot chocolate. We try to hide from shadows with a multitude of lights and a cacophony of loud holiday music.

And folks are right, it has been a difficult 2 years for many of us and the world at large. Welcome to the party. There's no getting around that. But avoiding it, not being still with it for a moment, will do nothing for us in the long run. Because at some point, we will have to turn off the music, put away the lights and be with ourselves and the world again.

I recently read a wonderful book titled "*Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*" by Katherine May. "Wintering", May says, is a call to turn inward with the difficulties in our lives, to understand that they are but seasons of change, and that there is treasure and value in those fallow periods. This resonates deeply with me, because the frenetic, energetic, over-exuberant displays of cheer and goodwill that seem to extend from early November to New Year's Day is too much for me, it's not a sustainable way of being. I'm not obviously filled with self-pity or moroseness, but at some point, it becomes a false mask that needs to drop off my face because before me people are in pain, they are dying, they are hungry, they are lonely, and they are suffering injustices that our systems inflict on them even through the merry season of Christmas.

Thank goodness my man John the Baptist is still around. He reminds me to wait, to turn inward, reflect and repent and know that hope and the coming of Emanuel is measured in equal parts by outward praise and inward discernment.

As I mentioned in my sermon for the first Sunday in Advent, our readings this season are difficult, blunt, and crude. Stay with them, be in Advent, in a posture of waiting, of reflecting why we celebrate the joyful coming of Christ in this world – why Jesus's light is so needed in the darkness of our lives.

This Sunday, John doesn't disappoint – you brood of vipers! We all know that chestnut and if we don't get past that particular phrase of his, we miss John's Christmas Gift to us!

This reading from Luke follows on the heels of the summary of John's preaching of a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," and the claim that his proclamation, which sets the table for the arrival of Jesus, was what Isaiah promised centuries prior. And what he does from the outset of our reading is challenge, yet again, his followers.

And he challenges them where it hits them hardest, in their sense of ancestor worship. Central to the Old Testament covenant is the generational promise, which begins with Abraham, continues with Isaac and Jacob, and is extended through them to all of their descendants. And it is that promise that John's followers were banking on. They would see the kingdom of God because their ancestors were promised that. But John says that this promise is meaningless, apart from repentance. In other words, claiming promise of Abraham without the faith of Abraham simply doesn't work.

The game has changed, and we now need to look at ourselves, our faith, our actions, and our own covenant with God. What your forebears achieved, whatever status or rank you give their memory really doesn't matter to the issues at hand. Who our people were won't get us to heaven. Oh, you brood of vipers. Repent. But John doesn't hit and run, however. He doesn't slander us and then leave us to live in an ivory tower. What can we do to repent?

Listen to what he says:

- "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."
- "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."
- "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages."

All of these things John exhorts have one thing in common. They are all relational. We must measure our relationship with God through our relationships with each other. God's promise that our needs will be met is only as good as our ability to meet the needs of those who are cold and hungry. God's wish for us to have an abundant life is only as good as our ability to ensure that such abundance is available for all, not for a select few. God's assurance that justice will flow like a river, and righteousness like a mighty stream can only be secured when we stand up and speak up for others who cannot do so themselves, and break down oppressive systems.

When that happens, the miracle of the Christ Child, Emanuel – God with Us – becomes the reality. And what John reminds us, indeed what Advent reminds us, is that if we rush into the Joy of Jesus's coming, if our eyes are only focused on the celebration, bright lights, and piles of presents, then we miss what's going on in front of us. We miss being present to the sadness of others, the pain of others, the poverty of others. Don't do that, John says to us today. The God

you seek in the manger is already there before you. For you to love and to be redeemed by. And that same Christ Child will hold the winnowing fork, to gather the wheat and burn away the chaff. That, my friends, is the Good News, and depending on your perspective, the Not So Good News.

I want to leave you with one more line from the book "Wintering": Katherine May writes, "We can deal only with what's in front of us at this moment in time. We take the next necessary action, and the next. At some point along the line, that next action will feel joyful again." Amen.