

What Can We Do?

Luke 3:7-16

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

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Sometimes, maybe most of the time, we don't know what to do with John the Baptist.

After all this is the guy who Matthew and Mark describe as wearing camel's hair with a leather belt, and eating locusts and wild honey. And while those details might not mean a lot to us, because they are pointed out we can't help but assume they are unusual.

And this is the guy who is living in the wilderness. And remember the wilderness isn't a place people want to go, nor is it the place where the rich and powerful and influential hang out.

But, *he* is the one who prepares the way for Jesus. *He* is the one whose ministry announces the ministry of Jesus. And *he* is, therefore, the one who also helps tell us what we can do to get ready for the fullness of God's kin-dom.

And yet, he comes on scene in Luke's gospel with a demeanor and attitude that make us uncomfortable. He feels, in the opening verses of this reading, like the guy on the street corner shouting in his megaphone about the end of the world. And we don't know what to do with him.

And that's partially true because we've largely been taught that Christianity is about our *personal* faith and our *personal* salvation. So when he comes at us that way, we can't help but take it personally.

But both John and Jesus, along with the Hebrew prophets, would tell us that our faith is not just about ourselves, but is really about justice and mercy, about equity and compassion, about the making right of the world in which we live...THIS world.

Both John and Jesus, along with the Hebrew prophets, would tell us that our faith is about turning this world on its head, about speaking truth to power, about confronting those who are using their power to harm others, and about setting the oppressed free. In fact, it's not just them...next week we will also hear Mary's song and we will remember again that her song is a strong indictment of the systems in the world around her and around the child who would soon be born to her.

Both John and Jesus, along with the Hebrew prophets, would tell us that our faith is not about some far off place someday, but about changing corrupt systems of power and economy, and about transforming our world to be a place based in an economy of hope and peace, of joy and love.

See, we are so formed to think of *personal* faith that when we hear John's rant many of us feel anxious or even get offended. We don't want to be called a "brood of vipers."

But what if John is ranting at the world around them, ranting at the structures and systems the people are living in? What if John is offering a new way of life and asking the people to take responsibility for helping to create it? What if John is helping them identify the problems with the systems and helping them find a way out?

And what if the people who are there listening to John, what if they are already upset about the way the world they live in is shaped...about the way the Roman authorities are controlling their movements...about the way some of their leaders - both political and faith leaders - have built corrupt alliances that are for *their* own good but working to the detriment of most people?

See, we modern Christians, have too often lost track of the details of the world into which Jesus was born. We have missed noticing the corrupt politics *and* we have sometimes refused to hear the reality that John and Jesus were both *often* speaking to the political and power systems of their day.

What if we could hear that reality?

Then perhaps we would be standing with the people in the crowd who shouted out to John, "What, then, should we do?" Maybe we would be willing, like the tax collectors and soldiers in the crowd, to ask specifics that apply to our personal commitments and personal economics, to even be open to hear a critique of the systems we live in recognizing when they are benefitting us even as they oppress others.

And if we are willing to ask such questions, we would discover, as the people that day did, that "[John's] answer is practical, reasonable, economic, and most of all, full of hope: *You who have two coats, give one away to someone who has none*, he says. *You who have two loaves of bread, do likewise. Behave fairly, treat people justly, no matter what job you have*" (Nancy Rockwell, "The Economics of Hope" at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/the-economics-of-hope/>).

Nancy Rockwell writes, "The tree root he is pointing to is the economy. *The system is corrupt*, he has preached, over and over. And they know it is. *Change the economy*, he urges them, *starting now, where you are, with what you have. When you do that, you will no longer be enslaved to the unjust system that has been oppressing you. You will be building a better world. You will be doing what you can...and you will no longer be enemies or rivals or unholy to each other. You will be invested in making [as we heard in the quote from Isaiah last week] the crooked places straight and the rough ways smooth. And then you will begin to see the salvation of God*" (<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/the-economics-of-hope/>).

Friends, John offers us an invitation.

It is an invitation to change...to change ourselves and our commitments, our priorities and our vision.

It is an invitation to change...to change the world one coat, one meal, one act of justice-seeking defiance at a time.

It is an invitation to change...to change the direction of our heart as we learn that caring for people is more important than accumulating things.

It is an invitation to change...to turn from fear and scarcity and to turn toward generosity and joy in ways that liberate us even as they offer life to others.

It is an invitation to change...change that is rooted in hope, peace, joy, and love - things that are more than Advent commitments...they are acts of resistance, acts that resist the fear and conflict and suspicion that are too often peddled by those in power.

Even though it doesn't always seem like it, possibility and power live within us. We have the ability to choose how we live and how we treat others. We even have the ability to make choices that influence the systems around us and shape them for the good of all people. We have the ability to live in ways that claim for ourselves and offer for others hope and peace, joy and love. This is the way of Advent. This is the work of preparing for the fullness of God's kin-dom. This is our invitation. Amen.