

12/16/18  
Advent 3C  
Luke 3:7-18  
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It surprises me that crowds of people came to John to be baptized. It surprises me for a couple of reasons. First because John wasn't set up on some street corner in Jerusalem, he was out in the wilderness so the people who came out to be baptized had walked along way. Second, John is not very good at pre-baptismal counseling. When parents bring their child to me and ask for it to be baptized, I require that they attend a class, so that I can talk to them about what Baptism means, how this is a joyful time because their child is being welcomed into the body of Christ and through the water and word receives these gifts – forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, and the promise of everlasting life with God. John on the other hand, takes a little bit different approach to pre-baptismal counseling. When the crowds of people are coming to John to be baptized he says to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” The rugged area that John preached in was covered with brushwood and stubble and would sometimes catch on fire and the flames would leap quickly through the dry nettles. When this happened vipers and snakes would scurry wildly from their hiding places to escape the flames. Calling the crowd a brood of vipers was hardly complimentary, but it was accurate.

They had all heard or sensed that a time of judgement was coming and what better place to hide from the coming fire than in the water of the Jordan River where John was baptizing people?

And so the crowds gather at the Jordan, waiting to be baptized, hoping that this will be an easy way out of the fire and judgement. You go down in the river and get washed by John, he says some words about repentance and forgiveness and you go home. It sounds pretty quick and painless, especially if it will save their souls so why not try it some of the people in Jerusalem figure? But John doesn't let them off that easy. "Look around," John says, "Seems we've got some bad trees around here not bearing good fruit. Everyone of them is going to be cut down and thrown into the fire." John says all these things about being thrown into the fire and yet, Luke says, this is how John "proclaimed the good news to the people." I can't help but wonder to myself, "Since when has hell been good news?"

From what I can see, people are not banging on the doors of our church to hear more about hell, and certainly not just before Christmas. Those preoccupied with hell – what its geography will look like, who will or won't be there – those people are more likely to find definitive answers about hell from the radio stations of the Bible Belt down south than from the average pulpit on a Sunday morning.

If we speak of hell at all this time of year, we are probably referring to some aspect of the commercialized pressure cooker called “the holiday season”. We’re not thinking so much of Satan’s legion of demons as the crowds of people trying to find a sales clerk to help them in the department store, or the traffic circling the malls in search of a closer parking spot. God knows that can be hell.

But hell? You know, hell’s, hell? The real place of fire, and torment and damnation. That’s not what comes to mind during the Christmas season. During the Christmas season we want to hear good news, and since when is hell good news?

If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that there is a basic human impulse that finds joys in final judgements. Christians too sometimes want to see people getting smoked. In movies we want to watch while the bad guys get it. We want them locked up and the keys thrown away. We want the bad guys to get what they deserve. In the movie “Unforgiven” which is sort of a version of the classic Western – good guys versus bad guys movie, Clint Eastwood plays one of the good guys. As Clint Eastwood shoots Gene Hackman, the crooked lawman, Clint says to him, “See you in hell.” And anyone who is watching the movie wants to cheer, “Right on, Clint!” Hell’s what he deserved.”

So why wouldn't John's hellfire come as good news to the crowds who had put up with the bad guys for so long? They had put up with the Romans (bad guys) ruling their country. They had put up with King Herod (the ultimate bad guy) who had ordered shortly after the birth of Jesus that all of the Jewish boys of Bethlehem age two and under be killed. They had put up with some pretty bad guys. The fire was being prepared for these bad apples and that was good news.

And for those who planned and manned gas chambers in Auschwitz, Genocide in Rwanda and "ethnic" cleansing in Bosnia, and for those who engage in school shootings, or shootings at churches, synagogues and mosques, why not hell? If God is just, where else could God put them? Perhaps corrupt leaders and evildoers ought to go to bed every night thinking that there might just be a hell.

But what the New Testament proclaims as a reality is not hell. It proclaims that our real life is in Jesus Christ so that what became of him will become of us: "For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" according to Paul in 1 Corinthians. It proclaims that "God so loved the world" and that the Lord is "not wishing that any should perish." God's will for us does not include hell, and nowhere does the gospel proclaim, "The kingdom of hell is at hand."

So the Good News is not that there will be a day of judgement when all of the bad guys will get what they deserve. The Good News is the warning bell that John the Baptist sounds. John warns that the judgement is coming, but in the mean time there is still time to repent and receive forgiveness for our sins. There is still time for us to turn around and follow the path that Jesus walked. The path which winds through earth, but leads to heaven. John's warning is Good News!

Perhaps some of you remember hearing about this accident that happened in Texas a few years ago. A barge hit a support beam on the highway going from Port Isabel to South Padre Island in far south Texas. As a result a portion of the highway plunged into the waters of Laguna Madre. This all happened during the very early morning hours. Before this accident was reported to anybody, several, I think it was 7 or 8 automobiles drove through the opening, plummeted into the water several hundred feet below and were killed. Every person in those cars died.

It took several hours before authorities on both ends of the highway were notified and all traffic warned of the disaster and the tragedy. It was a horrible event. Even worse business on the island suffered greatly as this was the only way for trucks, cars and vacationers to reach the island. Many

were angry that plans had to be canceled, businesses shut down, and only ferries could be used to enter and exit the island.

Now if it was you heading for South Padre Island that morning, driving on that road, wouldn't you have rejoiced that the warning was there and been glad you had been warned and not let to discover, tragically, the emptiness of the broken highway?

And that is why we rejoice this morning over John's message. We don't rejoice that some people, hopefully the bad guys, will be going to hell. We rejoice that John has given us a warning. John says, "The bridge is out. Don't go that way! It only leads to death. Turn around, follow Jesus, and live!"