

A sermon preached on December 16th, 2018 – the third Sunday in Advent – based upon Luke 3:7- 13.

This is our second week in Advent with John the Baptist as the featured character. Last week Luke began by naming all the people in power – the Roman Emperor and Roman governor and the local Jewish leaders both political and religious. He names them, and then makes it clear that this is not where help is coming from. He proceeded to tell of this strange figure named Joh – a voice crying out in the wilderness – with a message for all people regarding a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. God is calling for a change in the lives of all people.

He chapters 1 and two, Luke gives us the origins of from which the real help came from, beginning thirty years earlier with the story of a poor pregnant out-of-wedlock teenager from a Podunk town who gives birth to her baby in stable because there was no room in the inn.

Help, Luke is telling us is not coming from the high place of power and authority in this world – help is coming from lowly, humble places.

This week we get more particulars of what John the Baptist had to say.

He begins with a dire warning: The day of judgement is coming.

John proceeds to call out Jewish people who assume that as “God’s chosen people” they need not worry themselves regarding the day that is coming when they will have to stand before God to receive judgment. Your birthline won’t exempt you from the need for authenticity – to have your heart and your actions in line with God’s will.

John’s message today would be the same to Christians who think that just because we have taken Jesus as our personal savior who died for our sins that we need not concern ourselves with the coming judgment.

In the latter part of our passage John speaks of the coming of the messiah. But in the middle part John addresses the very practical question of what true repentance looks like. He responds to the question, “What shall we do?” And the striking thing in what John says is how down to earth are the sorts of things God is looking for from us. God isn’t looking for anybody to personally save the world (that’s what the coming messiah is to do.)

He’s looking for us to shine a little line in our little corner of the universe.

I heard about a survey which asked parents what qualities they would most hope to instill in their children, and although there were numerous responses, three emerged most consistently: They were “kindness”, “honesty” and “to be a hard worker”.

(Of course the best chance that our children will grow up to possess these qualities is if they see us authentically walking the walk – that we not only preach honesty, kindness and hard work but that we live out these qualities as well.)

Interestingly, honesty, kindness and hard work are essentially what John tells the crowds to do. If you have two coats and you meet someone who is freezing for lack of a coat, be kind and give that person your second coat. If your job is to be a taxcollector be honest – don't cheat people out of what is theirs – if you are a soldier, don't be a bully. Don't cut corners. Do a good job.

It is striking that John doesn't tell anybody to change their jobs. Do the jobs you find yourself presently filling well; be honest and be kind to the people you come in contact with as you go about doing your job.

If you find yourself working at the Department of Motor Vehicle be kind and patient with the confused customers who come to your window. If you are a sales clerk in a store do a good job and be helpful to your co-workers and your customers. If you are a police officer on patrol be honest and respectful of the people you encounter; don't be a bully. If you work in a bank, don't mislead the customers about the financial services you are selling. Wherever you are work hard, be honest, and treat people with kindness. The same applies if you are a parent or a spouse or a church members or a friend. Fulfill this roles to the best of your ability with kindness and honesty.

Keep your focus right here, right now. There are times to think about your goals for the future and your ambitions in life, but don't let these thoughts keep you from your primary focus with is to do a job here and now. Do the jobs to which you are presently assigned and do them well.

If we ask ourselves how to prepare for Christmas, a good plae to start would be by focusing on kindness, honesty, and conscientiously doing your job.

There always needs to be at least one reference to “It's a wonderful life” in this season of the year. Essentially the message of the movie is that by doing his job as a banker well, with honesty and kindness, George Baily was having a far greater impact on the people around him than he could begin to imagine.

And since I can only go a couple of months without mentioning Near Death Experiences in a sermon – it is common for people in their out of body experiences to undergo what is referred to as a Life Reviews which is a kind of judgment that takes place in the context of unconditional love. The striking thing that people talk about is how it was not so much what we would think of as big things that are focused upon in the Life Review – rather it is the little things – whether they related to the people they came in contact with conscientiously, honestly and kindly.

This is pretty basic stuff. It is the message of Micah 6:8 “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

“Our epistle lesson comes at this from another angle. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Where are peace and joy typically sought after? Typically we say peace is found where people stop fighting. Joy is found when the stars line up and everything goes our way.

We are constantly hoping for peace such as this, but Paul suggests to us that there is a different kind of peace that is found not outside of us but rather deep inside our hearts in a mysterious communion with the Spirit of God. It’s the peace that passeth understanding. Paul implies that joy is found more readily as a gift from above rather than as a product of finally getting all our ducks in a row.

There is a similar idea hidden in the Gospel lesson and that we are called to be the change we want to see in this world. There is no denying the fact that there are laws that need to be changed. But there is a suggestion in the words of John the Baptist that the starting place for a deeper transformation of this world is found when individuals begin to live with honesty and compassion, and focus on doing their assigned jobs well.

It is easy to point a finger at others as our excuse for not living out of the reality of kingdom of God right now. But we don’t need to wait on others. We can embrace the possibilities open to us right here, right now to walk in the light of the Lord.