

12-12-21
Advent 3
Luke 3:7-18

What Should We Do?

We've all asked the question people asked John at one time or another. Sometimes we already know the answer. I suspect some of them did, too.

I promise the stories I'm about to tell are not real. So don't waste time trying to figure out if you know the people involved. Stories like these can come from any of us. And probably have or will

The young couple had not been married long. Everybody but them saw problems coming. It didn't take long for them to see them, too. By the time they decided to sit down and talk with someone, things were pretty much out of control. She said all she wanted was a marriage just like her parents had. She believed they had been married thirty years or more and had never passed a harsh word. Now you know and I know that that was a lie, but she didn't know it. And she thought anything short of that was failure. He had an altogether different set of expectations that didn't have anything to do with being like her folks. As they poured out their hearts, they eventually came to that question: So what should we do? Like most people who marry these days, the first thing that came to mind was to quit, give up and find someone else who could give them what they were looking for.

Another couple. Another stage of life. Another set of issues. They didn't want to put dad in the nursing home. But they were running out of options. They had jobs and kids and responsibilities, and they had tried caring for him themselves, but it had just gotten to be too much. Nobody grows up expecting to change their father's diapers. They had put off talking about nursing home care for as long as they could. Everyone knew it

wasn't what they wanted, and they weren't sure they could afford it, but what should they do? The guilt was about to overtake them. But the stress was even more of a problem. So, what should they do?

Another person. Another situation. Something is just not right in my life. I was reared in the Church. It was a big part of my life. But then I got busy. And I drifted away. And now I'm not sure how to go back. I know it won't be like I remember it, but I know I need to be there. But I don't want to deal with the questions. Those people know me, or they think they do. And they'll want to know where I've been and why. I don't want to deal with that, but I know I'll have to. But I know I need what goes on there. So what should I do?

OK, this one is real. The past couple of years have been hard on all of us. And they've been hard on the Church. But we've weathered it all better than we thought we would. Things are beginning to get back to normal in lots of places, but we're still lagging behind at the Church. Many who used to be here are not. And we're not sure how to get them back. We know some of them are watching on Facebook, but we miss being together. We miss seeing kids. And just as we thought we were beginning to turn a corner, the preacher announces that he's leaving. That can't be good. We know his reasons are legitimate, but it still puts us in a situation we didn't want to be in. So what should we do? We're all going to have to step up, and we're not sure we want to. It takes a lot of effort to run a ministry like this. There are people here and in this town who depend on us. If we can't get our own flock to come back, how are we supposed to reach out to the rest of the world? We know the process of calling a pastor is long and involved. We're Presbyterians, so that's to be expected. Has it really been almost nine years since we've had to do this? We're just not sure we're up to this. So what should we do?

That's the same question that people asked John when he told them their world was about to change around them. He wasn't particularly gentle about his message. Called them names—at least our preacher isn't doing that one his way out the door!

But he keeps talking about repentance. Keeps talking about change.

And everybody knows what a difficult issue change can be. Even when we think we're for it, we're usually ready for somebody else to change and let us stay as we are. We've adjusted to all kinds of change. We resisted some of it for as long as we could, but we finally had to get a cell phone and an email address or sit there by ourselves, so we adapted. But can't they at least leave the Church alone? We know how to do what we do. It worked for us. Why can't it work for our kids and theirs?

What was the Church in John's day was about to change in ways no one saw coming. People had been waiting for generations for this one John seemed to think was really coming this time. But they were ill prepared for what he would be when he arrived. Even John struggled to understand Jesus, and he had worked hard to help people prepare for his coming. He had told people to repent, to turn from what wasn't working and to turn back to God's way which does. He warned people explicitly that their heritage, their genealogy or their cultural connections, would not be enough. It would never be enough to claim to be descendants of Abraham. God had called Abraham and promised him a great nation, larger than anyone could number. And now that nation had been in existence for generations. But God's intention was that the people who comprised that nation would follow God as faithfully as Abraham had. And they had not. But they always clung to their heritage, hoping that if their own witness wasn't enough to sustain them, then who they were might be. Now John comes saying that's not enough. Being descended from Abraham won't cut it. And that's all some of them had. So in all earnestness, they asked John, then what should we do? If not this, then what?

As Reformed Christians, we cling to the idea that nothing we can do can save us. God has already done that in Jesus Christ, the One those people who came to hear John were waiting to meet. We have met him, just as they did. And most of us have committed ourselves to him. But what about the quality of our

lives? Do they reflect his presence in them? Or is it something we live in for an hour or so a week and then go back to being like everyone else when we leave here? John said if we had two coats and know someone who doesn't have one, we should know what to do. If we have plenty of food and know people who don't, we should know what to do. Have you looked in your hall closet lately? Then you know what to do. You already know that we're going to ask you to bring groceries to church on the last Sunday of every month and that Rick is going to come pick them up and carry them over to MICA where June and Shelli and others will see to it that they get to people who need them. Some of you let Melisa know that you'll cook up some of those groceries once a month and bring them so she and her crew and give them to people who depend on them. I was in a nearby place of business the other day, and a guy I didn't know asked me how much we charge for those meals we sell on Tuesdays in the wintertime. When I told him it wasn't just us, but all the downtown churches who brought those meals and that no money changed hands, that we gave them away, he was incredulous.. I had no idea anyone did that kind of thing, he said. When I told him the Baptists did it on another night of the week and that our group would continue to do Tuesdays through the winter, he had no idea. I wondered what he thought we did in these walls and in the walls of those other churches downtown. God has blessed most of us with more than enough to sustain us: clothes we haven't worn in ten years, food we pass over when we run out to eat something else that someone else cooks—and cleans up. We believe that is one of those things we both should do and can do—share what we have with some who have less. Not just because it might earn us some points toward a place in Heaven, but because it's the right thing to do, and we know it.

John's words to the crowd assembled wasn't enough. Some specific, particular groups of people came. I guess we've always been that way. The preacher says all that stuff, and surely there is someone there who needs to hear it, but what about us? What should we do? It was some tax collectors who came first.

None of us like the tax man. Tate says he's going to take one of those away from us soon, but we will still cringe when we pay other kinds of taxes. Nobody likes the tax man, regardless of what benefit we derive from what he collects. As touchy as our relationship with taxes can be, it was even more complicated for people in John's day. It was the Romans who collected taxes. The Romans didn't share the faith of God's people. They didn't seem to have a faith of their own. They were oppressors, causing God's people to live under the control of yet another government that didn't care for them or provide for them. And to make matters worse, they hired people from among them to collect taxes. There were no tax codes online or printed in a booklet so everyone knew the system was fair. It wasn't. Tax collectors didn't draw a salary and draw a pension. The Romans told them how much they wanted, and whatever they could collect over that was theirs. We think we hate the tax man. What if he were your neighbor, and you knew he was extorting you, and there was nothing you could do about it? So the tax collectors came with their version of the question. What should we do? We're caught up in this corrupt system, and we know it's not right, but it's how we make our living? What should we do? John had little mercy. Stop gouging. Collect what's fair. John cut right to the heart of the matter. Those who asked knew what they should do, and John minced no words about it.

The soldiers came next. These were most likely Romans, charged with keeping order. But there was something about these people they had come to appreciate, something about their life and witness that had caught their attention. Sure, the soldiers were there to keep order, whatever it took, and many abused that power, but some of them were beginning to think there might be something to this stuff the Hebrews believed about their God. So they, too, came to John and asked, "What about us? What should we do? We're not even part of this crowd, but we find ourselves somehow drawn to it. What about us, what should we do?" And John had a word for them. Treat people fairly. Do not oppress just because you can. Don't demand more than you deserve.

Learn to be content, especially when your discontent causes harm to another.

Repentance, then, it seems, is not just a one time turning. Not something we can recite at Church and then go back to our business. It is something that must be lived our daily in the midst of the lives we really live. In concrete ways and touching every part of our life. Repent, turn from what doesn't work to what does.

It's no wonder that people thought John must be the One they were waiting for.

But he knew better. I am not he, he said. I am here to call you to prepare for him, for he is coming.

We stand here today on the third Sunday of this time of preparation in which we engage every year. Our waiting is different than theirs because we know who we're waiting for, and we know he will come and that he will expect things of us when he does.

As we wait again this year, we ask the same question they did: What should we do. And, just as most of them did, we already know the answer. Whatever it is that God will call forth from us must come from who we really are and what we really do. It is not enough to just tack an extra prayer onto our day because it's Advent. Each of us needs to look deeply into the life we'll live tomorrow and the next day and the next before we come back here again. And we must be honest about what we see when we look there. Whatever you see, there is probably some room for revision, some time to adjust priorities and to find new ways to show the world that we belong to this One who is coming, the One who will not only save us from our sin and prepare a place for us in Heaven, but the One who wants us to bring some of Heaven here among us while we wait for him to come again.

It probably strikes you as odd that at the end of today's text, Luke says that what John was saying was Good News. Anything that requires that much of us is hard to call good. Anything that requires us to change is hard to label good. But it was Good News that John brought. The world is about to

change. From something that runs contrary to God's will to something that demonstrates it to the world. That change is still coming. And that's Good News. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Good Lord, that voice that cried out in the wilderness all those years ago still cries out to us from the pages of Scripture and from our hearts and minds, calling us to prepare the way of the Lord. Help us to use these days to prepare our own hearts for his coming as we pray and reflect on what is coming among us and what it will require of us. This is that time of year for us when the days are short and often gloomy and the nights are long and dark. Help us to see this cycle as a sign that you provide for us even though we think we'd like more sunshine and less dark. Maybe we need this time to reflect on your provision for us. Help those of us who have warm and comfortable homes to be thankful for them. And help us to remember those who do not know that security and those who have homes, but not safe ones, not welcoming ones, not ones where people are encouraged to thrive. Help us to commit ourselves to seeing that all your children have safe and decent places to live and enough to eat so that they can thrive and find ways to learn about you and your care for them and for all people. Help us to rid the circles over which we have control of divisiveness and conflict. Help us to get caught up in the generosity, the kindness and the care that this season calls forth from us. As we move closer to the birth of Christ, remind us of how dangerous the world into which he came was, how opposed to what he wanted to do with it it still can be. Help us to identify ways that we participate in that opposition and to repent and change both our attitudes and our behaviors. In these days of Advent, help us set aside our claims to power and to find ways to serve in humility and love, never seeking recognition, but always opening ourselves to the needs of those around and among us. As we gather as families and as your family in the Church to

celebrate these special days, remind us of all the reasons we have to rejoice. Then let us rejoice together. Let us experience your love and then help others know it, too. Guard our hearts from evil, Good Lord, keep us focused on you so that we don't get caught up in the evil around us, whatever it is and from wherever it comes, especially that evil that comes from deep within us. Give us your peace. Help us to be content, even in this season built on making us discontent. Send to those who suffer. Send us to all who need our help. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, the one who has come and who is coming again, the One who taught us all to pray when he said: *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.*