



**“Right Here. Right Now.”**  
**Scripture – Luke 3:7-18**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, December 13, 2015**

Each year in Advent, the church takes a considerable risk of ruining the season by inviting John the Baptist to make an appearance. December is the time for brightening our homes with holly and candles. We decorate Christmas trees and we go to parties! Despite the fact that the temperature is in the sixties, we still dream of reindeers pulling sleighs and snowmen in top hats. We listen to the soaring music of Handel’s Messiah and belt out our favorite Christmas carols. Must we invite to our worship John the Curmudgeon?

On the first Sunday of Advent, we lit the candle of hope. Last Sunday, we lit the candle of peace. Today, we lit the pink candle and it is not as some have suggested, because Mary was really wishing for a baby girl! She might have been, but we just don’t know that. The pink candle on the Advent wreath represents what? JOY!

As Nancy (Mary) was reading the lectionary passage from Luke highlighting the message of John the Baptist, how many of you instinctively pictured Joy? If you raise your hand, I will know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you were not listening!

There are four lectionary readings for each Sunday of the year. Listen to just a snippet from the other three for today and the joy is unmistakable. The prophet Zephaniah cries out, “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all our heart, O daughter Jerusalem! (Zephaniah 3:14).

The prophet Isaiah says: “Sing praises to the Lord, for the Lord has done gloriously...Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion.” (Isaiah 12:5).

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Philippians, says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice! (Philippians 4:4)

Then, we flip the page to the Gospel of Luke and read the words of John the Baptist: ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor,” for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’ Paul says to “Rejoice in the Lord,” but John the Baptist jerks us back to the wrath of God.

Imagine this: next Sunday when we send out carolers to the retirement homes to visit our homebound members, instead of singing “Joy to the World!” we open with “You brood of vipers!”

This is the time to indulge in holiday cheer and the Baptizer focuses our attention on sharp-bladed axes and a terrifying fire. Wouldn't we rather be inspired by a positive vision than threatened with a punishment? Wouldn't we rather be inspired by the grace of God than intimidated by a harsh judgment?

When our children do not behave as they should, we try to modify their behavior with positive incentives. "Eat your vegetables and you get ice cream for dessert." "Clean up your mess and you can play your video game."

However, the positive behavioral modification does not always work, does it? When it fails to achieve the desired results, we resort to threats. "If you keep acting like this, I'm going to send you to your room!" I am sure no one here has ever used this one: "If you do not go to sleep, Santa will not come!" No one likes being threatened, but sometimes a warning of a dark future awakens us to how we should be living in the present.

I think that is what John the Baptist is up to. He is to prepare people for the coming of Christ and he is afraid that they will not be ready, so he resorts to menacing metaphors. The axe is in position to chop down any tree not bearing good fruit. The winnowing fork is on standby to separate the wheat from the chaff.

For years, I misunderstood this whole business of separating the wheat from the chaff. I thought they represented two different groups of people. The wheat are those who live according to God's standards and the chaff are those who flaunt God's ways. But at some point, I recognized that each of us is a mixture of wheat and chaff. Sometimes we are kind and sometimes we are cruel. Sometimes we make self-sacrifices other times we are self-centered. Jesus wants to save what is good in us and discard what is corrupt. Listen to how *The Message* version of the Bible translates this passage. "But John intervened: 'I'm baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house – make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false, he'll put out with the trash to be burned.'"

John's warning elicited the desired response. The people ask John, "What should we do?"

As fiery and demanding and uncompromising as John can sound, I am truly amazed by the way he responds. Because it is so practical and achievable. He says, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Simply share.

Tax collectors ask John, "What should we do?" John does not say, "Stop collecting money from your brothers and sisters and handing it over to the Romans. Get a new job." He says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." In other words, don't shake down people. Be fair.

Soldiers come to John and ask "What about us?" I would expect John to say, "Throw away your weapons, leave the army, and pick up a new profession." Instead, John says, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." In other words, do not use your power to abuse people. Treat people as you want to be treated.

John says that the coming of Jesus should make an impact on the way we live and how we treat one another. He does not set out idealistic, but impossible demands. He provides very practical advice of what we can do, not some time in the future when life is less chaotic, but what we can do right here; right now. We can share what we have, we can be kind and respect one another, and we can treat one another with the same love that God treats us.

Pastor Jim Lowry remembers a controversy that was brewing in the Presbyterian Church a few years ago. At each presbytery meeting the subject would emerge and the atmosphere was tense. "On the day of division, trumped up charges and counter charges were leveled, harsh words were exchanged, bitterness was palpable, and by day's

end, the vote was taken. Sixteen congregations left the denomination. It was by far the saddest and most bitter day of his ministry.”

“A few weeks later, a couple having dinner at his home received a frantic phone call from their babysitter saying their infant was in distress. Lowry drove them home at breakneck speed. From there, he drove them to their local hospital emergency room and from there, at the doctor’s strong urging, he drove them, again at top speed, to a regional medical center more than a hundred miles away.”

“Finally, at 3:00 in the morning, with the baby stabilized and grandparents on the scene, he took his leave. Only then, walking through the hospital lobby, knowing he had arrived on gas fumes, he realized that in the rush, he had left home without his wallet. No cash. No credit card.”

“Then, as if on cue, coming down the corridor was one of his most ardent adversaries from the presbytery meeting. He was in the hospital at that unlikely hour to visit a desperately ill member of his congregation.”

“In Lowry’s view, this man and his ilk had profaned the deepest truth he held, and he knew the other man felt the same about him. Each of them was certain that the other had corrupted the faith they both held dear.”

“They greeted each other and exchanged a few halfhearted pleasantries. Finally, Lowry mustered the courage to tell the man his plight. Without the least hesitation, the man handed him \$20 for gas. Lowry thanked him and turned to go out to the parking lot. As he was starting his car, he saw the man running toward him. ‘Wait,’ the man said, ‘Here’s my Visa card just in case you have car trouble or want to buy something to eat.’ Healing took place in that parking lot. The church was not reunited and neither of them changed their opinions of the other person’s stance, but healing took place.”<sup>1</sup>

In addition to standing up for what we believe to be right and true – alongside our deeply held principles – there must also be healing grace. Even with those with whom we totally disagree, and even if we cannot admit that *we* might be wrong, we must not turn others into monsters. The gospel of Jesus Christ demands that we must have a concern about the other’s well-being and that we be ever-ready to respond with grace. Right now!

## NOTES

1. James S. Lowry, “The Samaritan,” *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2015.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Weaver of the world and Spinner of the stars, we give you thanks for your precious gift of life, for the beauty of the earth, for opportunities to love, and for the guidance of Scripture teaching us how to live. We are particularly grateful for this special season of the year when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. As we near the day of celebration, our minds are flooded with fond memories of past Christmases. We remember the warmth of gatherings with family and friends, the welcoming tables of delicious food and drink, the anticipation of sharing gifts, the special moments in worship, and the singing of favorite carols that make our hearts swell and our lips quiver. May we remember those occasions when we felt especially close to loved ones and connected to you – when love and tenderness were palpable and we were aglow with your Spirit. We pray that this Christmas our souls will be saturated with wonder and delight.

Everlasting God, during these dark days when terrorism stalks our planet, when racism divides our communities, when fear of foreigners turns hearts cold and spirits mean, we pray that Christ will come into our lives again and again.

Filling our hearts with compassion, not only for people like ourselves,  
but for all people of good will;  
Kindling a spirit of generosity toward those who struggle to put food on their tables  
and to find a safe place to sleep;  
Fostering empathy for those facing the loss of their job;  
Stirring a desire to forgive those who have hurt us  
and the will to reconcile relationships needing repair;  
Reviving a thirst for justice, so that all may be liberated, and treated with fairness and  
equity; praying especially for the people who live in Bethlehem,  
Drenching us with a passion for peace, so that all of the time, the energy and the money  
that are devoted to divisiveness, violence and weapons of war  
may be redirected to food, housing, education, and healing.

Gracious God, as we inch ever closer to the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus, open our hearts, open our minds,  
open our souls so that Christ may be born in us again and again, infusing us with joy.

Despite the darkness that surrounds us, despite the fractures in our relationships, despite the difficulties in our  
lives and the trouble in our souls, implant a spirit of joy within us so that we might lock arms with one another  
and become partners with you in transforming the world. Amen.