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Luke 3:7-18

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Advent 3 Year C

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* “So, with many other exhortations, [John the Baptist] proclaimed the good news to the people.”
  + In all likelihood, most of what John the Baptist has just said would not have felt like “good news” to the crowd around him.
* “You brood of vipers!”
  + These are the first words that John utters after his proclamation that the messiah is coming. They are an insult!
    - The first time a serpent (snake) is mentioned in scripture: Leading Adam and Eve to sin.
  + Then that insult is followed by what could easily be perceived as an attack on one of the tenets of their faith: Having Abraham as your ancestor isn’t going to be enough! Followed by a threat toward anyone who might not be good enough.
* The crowd responds the same way any of us might, “So what should we do?”
  + John answers. Share generously. If you have two coats, give one away. If you have food, share it. (Note that there is no reference to an abundance or extra.)
    - For those of us who have spent most of our lives surrounded by twenty-first century Christianity, this sounds easy enough, doesn’t it?
    - In the first century, though, this was a radical idea. It was a world-changing idea.
      * First century people believed that the poor were stuck in that condition because they (or their ancestors) had somehow wronged God and they deserved their status.
        + ***They*** would have been the ones needing to repent.
        + The comfortable would have been perceived as blessed and have no need for repentance.
      * John the Baptist points out that the wealthy, too, have need for repentance. Wealth and privilege are not evidence of God’s favor.
  + The next time the question is asked, it comes from a specific group within the crowd. The tax collectors. “What should we do?”
    - “Collect only what is due to you.”
    - Again, it’s easy for us to miss the radical nature of this response.
    - BUT: In the first century, the position of tax collector was auctioned off to the highest bidder, who had to pay in advance the taxes he was expected to collect.
      * Anything left uncollected, then, was a loss to him.
      * And anything he collected that was over and above what he’d paid was his profit.
        + Most tax collectors hired underlings to do the dirty work and those men were paid out of the profits, hence there was a great deal of motivation to…well, gouge the taxpayers! Such behavior had become expected and accepted.
      * John the Baptist is calling for a deep-seated cultural change.
  + Last up: The soldiers. Their question is identical, “What should we do?”
    - And, just as the other answers may need explanation to us, so may the answer they are given. “Do not use your power to gain money; be satisfied with what you earn.”
      * Like tax collectors, it had become accepted and expected for soldiers to supplement their income.
      * And John reiterates his call for cultural change.
* And then he goes beyond simply calling for change. He begins making threats.
  + The one who follows, John says, will separate “wheat” from “chaff” and the chaff will be burned.
* So you’re telling us that everything we know, understand, and expect from the world will be turned upside-down, ***and*** that those who cling to the old ways might just be condemned….
  + ***And the author of this gospel calls this good news?!?***
* What if the division that winnowing fork brings isn’t separating “good people” from “bad people,” but separating the good from the bad within individuals?
  + Remember that in the verses that immediately precede these…the ones that were part of last week’s lesson, John promises, “All flesh shall see the salvation of God.”
    - If some people are condemned, then that promise—spoken by a man chosen by God—cannot be true.
  + John’s promise, then, isn’t that the winnowing fork that Jesus wields will separate humanity from one another.
* Even as he holds humanity accountable for the brokenness in us as individuals and in the systems we create (and make no mistake about it, twenty-first century American culture is no more righteous than the first century culture that surrounded John the Baptist and Jesus), there is Good News:
  + Jesus—the messiah whose birth we are preparing to remember, and whose return Christians anticipate with a mixture of anxiety and hope—will rid us of all the brokenness, sin, and dirt that is within us.
  + Eternity is in God’s hands. Not ours. Amen.