

Text: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-9; Luke 3:7-18

In a moment of weakness, I agreed to take our two children under the age of four, at night, in the cold, at what we affectionately call “the bewitching hour” to the New Haven Green to watch the Tree Lighting. I know now that I should have stayed home, but since I had promised, and am still trying to earn my credibility with them, I hurriedly strapped both kids into the stroller and headed downtown, shoving a cheese stick and an apple in each of their hands and calling it supper. I was careful to arrive only ten minutes before the tree lighting, with only enough money for one carnival ride per kid. I said before going in, no candy, no flashing reindeer hats and no waiting in lines to sit in Santa’s lap. We arrived on the green right on time, and twelve minutes later, the tree was lit, the ride was stopped, and home we went. As we walked back, my friend laughed at me, “Just because you work for Jesus doesn’t mean you have to turn your nose up at Santa.”

And in the days since, I have come to realize that this is the kind of thing my children will tell their therapist, to describe their mother, the priest—the woman who doesn’t like Christmas.

Of course, I don’t dislike Christmas, but I am sort of a Grinch. If not a Grinch, than just resistant to the gross commercialism of the holiday, the commoditization of my faith, the viral strain of stress and debt and expectation that spreads to all of us. It’s not that I don’t like Santa, I just think Jesus is better. I guess if I am honest, I just don’t like the way the holidays bring out the green-eyed monster in all of us, how we become anxious and entitled

and greedy, how it makes me consume too much or want too much or worry too much. I just want a celebration as simple and divine as the stable and manger itself.

And I guess too, I may feel a little more disjointed this year. It seems to have been a long, hard year since Christmas last.

But in my defense, I don’t stay a grinch all season. I usually come around by December 25th. And most likely this year, too, by the time Christmas morning breaks, I will be back on track. I’ll be ready to turn on Handel’s Messiah light some candles and pull out the nativity scene from under the bed, and put Baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling, in his spot in the manger.

It just takes me a little time to prepare. It just takes me a little time to adjust to the light.

Which is why Luke’s gospel doesn’t seem all that odd, even today when we are nearly halfway to the manger, just twelve days from Christmas. It’s not strange to me because I’m just not ready for Christmas by this point, and I have much preparation to do.

Not of the house or the kids or the food, but of my heart.

I need to hear John’s warning, his wisdom, his promise, and prepare my heart for the miracle of Christmas. I need time to head out into the wilderness. I need time to be redirected from the ways of the world; I need time for the fires to refine me.

If I am going to see the birth of Jesus for the miracle it is, I need a little Advent to get me ready.

Maybe that is why the lectionary, the church calendar, and today's gospel won't let us rush to Christmas. Because I am not the only one who needs a change of heart...especially now, during this season, when it is so easy to be convinced by media and modernity that the ways of the world are better than the ways of God, that the things of this life are better than the things of the next one. When we are tempted to buy more, to indulge more, to exploit more, to expose more. Maybe we need to be reminded of the brood of vipers the axe at the foot of our tree, the winnowing fork and the unquenchable fire.

Maybe that is the best way for us to prepare for the nativity, the best way for us to proceed toward the manger. Otherwise, we will miss it for the life altering, world changing, universe shifting miracle that is the birth of Jesus.

So Let us wallow in John's prophetic warning on this third Sunday in Advent, and take to heart his wisdom in order to make ourselves ready for the promises that are to come.

Let us hear John's proclamation to the people who have gathered at the river. They are people a lot like us—earnestly in pursuit of God, thoughtful about their faith, intentional in their approach to worship. They are people a lot like us, who need reminding that salvation is so much more than a baptism of repentance, so much more than anything a birthright can guarantee, so much more than any ancestor can pass on.

Let us come, like those who walked into the wilderness and are so totally disoriented by what they find in the water, that in fact, they are reoriented to a new life. Let us with a heart that is full and ready for service, bring forth fruits of repentance. Let us, like the people at the river, be so changed that we cry out, "What then must we do?" And then go and do something. Respond, take action; because that is the only thing you can do when you have been acted upon by the spirit.

And the truth that John tells them, it is so simple, so basic, so timeless. It's what my father told me every time I walked out the door of his house, "Behave Well, Lissa." It is what I tell my boys at the playground. "Share what you have, Be Fair, Don't Bully."

John says to the crowds, "If you have two coats, give one to someone without one. If you have food, share it. He says to the tax collectors, "Take only what is fair." He says to the soldiers, "Don't abuse your power."

John gives them a set of commands so ordinary, so do-able, so entirely within reach, that we too come to believe that if we only prepare our hearts for such simple service, we too can see the salvation of God.

Share what you have. Be fair. Don't bully. And you too shall see the salvation of God.

John reminds us that this reorientation to the other, this new way of living, this behavior that will bear fruit for the world, is

the kind of thing, that with the Spirit and Fire of the living God, will usher in the kingdom.

He promises us, that, like a good farmer, Christ will come to make of our fruits a bountiful harvest, to make a threshing floor that will break the shaft of disbelief and crush the stalk of misdirection, to be the winnowing fork of mercy and justice, that will lift all our imperfections and shortcomings, and blow them to the wind. He promises us that Christ will come to be the refining fire that will make us so perfect in the eyes of the Lord that we will actually be deserving of salvation.

And that is good news my friends.

Salvation awaits us, not just at the river, but with the wisdom we gain there and through what we take away from there.

Salvation awaits us, not necessarily because we perform what has been commanded, but because when we do, we are totally changed.

Salvation awaits us, not because we have escaped the fire, but because the fire has perfected us.

Really, what better news could there be, than to hear that if we come to the table willing and ready to receive the Lord, we will find there the strength and wisdom to help usher in the kingdom until he comes again. What better news could there be for us, than that God can change us, and change the world, and all we have to do is prepare our hearts for it.

What better news could there be, on this third Sunday in Advent, than to know that if we hear the warning, follow the

wisdom, and do the hard work of the threshing floor—the work of Advent—that we will be making the kingdom come, that we are being made ready for little king to come. And that by the time he comes, and comes again, our eyes will see, our ears will hear, our hearts will change, and we will be ready for the salvation that awaits us.

But it means we can't skip right to Christmas. There is purpose and design to this season. There is beauty to this time of gestation...because it gives us time to adjust to the light.

Advent work is hard work, but it is also holy work. When we let go of that which is not worthy, when we change our hearts to look out for the other, when we refuse to play by the rules of power and greed that tempt us to self-protect, stockpile, turn inward, we do the good work of Christian living. It is how we overthrow the kings of this world to make room for the king who is about to be born. It is how we prepare ourselves for the king, and do our part to prepare the kingdom for his return.

That is what we are doing here today, that is why we engage the Christian life through community and liturgy and service, because this is where we learn to do the hard work of Advent, in prayer and at the altar. This is where we make ourselves ready for salvation. Through worship and praise, we learn to wait in active and defiant hope, for the promises of Christ. Through prayer and supplication, through table fellowship and bread breaking, we are reconciled and set right. When we wait on our knees, with petition and thanksgiving, for the gift of life, for the promise of new life, for the community that is life sustaining,

God will meet us. All we have to do is meet the expectation and anticipation with intention.

So maybe it is more important than ever for us to hear John's words today. Before we go out and consume, consume, consume. Before we prepare our turkeys while letting our hearts stay frozen, before we try to buy something to offer when love or friendship would do. Maybe we just need to be reoriented, to focus not on preparing the house or the gifts or the food, but on what we have to do to get our hearts in order to see the miracles that are all around us.

If we take this time to remember whose we are, and for whom we are responsible, we can let go of the things that are not of God and hold fast to that which is. We don't have to be afraid to share what we have. We can afford to be fair. We don't need to use power or privilege for any purpose but to further the kingdom.

Advent work is good work; it is refining work; it is rewarding work. It is one of the holy ways we lift the veil between us and God to catch small glimpses of the Kingdom come.

And when we do, we prepare ourselves for the miracle of birth, the birth of God in the world, busting through to establish a new world order, where the lame are raised up, the outcasts are gathered, where there is singing and dancing and rejoicing because the kingdom, the relationships, the covenant has been restored.

On Friday when I left work, I saw two men coming from the soup kitchen back out into New Haven's first really cold day of

the year. I had literally been doing exegesis with Greta on the Greek word for "must" that Luke uses in this passage to talk about the moral imperative to give your coat away. And I tell you the truth, I saw my first Christmas miracle. I swear one man had two coats and he was giving one to his buddy. Maybe because he didn't like it, maybe because it didn't fit, maybe, just maybe, because he saw that his friend was cold and didn't have a coat, and he knew the truth of Luke's gospel without the Greek dictionary, without the exegesis, without having heard today's gospel being sung or my sermon preached.

Now that is the kind of miracle I don't want to miss. That is the spirit that I want to cultivate. That is the kind of kingdom worth preparing for, worth waiting for, worth working hard to have the eyes to see. That's no cheap carousel ride or tooth-rotting cotton candy or two-hour line for Santa's lap. That—charity, love, and sacrifice—that is the baby in the manger. That is a Christmas story as simple and divine as the manger itself.

Join me for just two more weeks, encourage me, encourage each other, to use this time to prepare for the miracle, to hear the warning, to have a change of heart, to refine our spirit, so that when Christmas comes, we will be ready to receive the birth of Jesus as the life changing, world-altering, universe shifting miracle that it is.

Sermon by The Revd Lissa Smith  
Part-time assistant, Christ Church, New Haven  
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