

Sermon on Luke 3:7-18
Third Sunday in Advent, St. Lucia Day, December 13, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

I've often wondered why John the Baptist was so popular when he was so rude to the crowds who came to him to hear him. For today's gospel passage begins with John addressing the crowds who came to be baptized, saying "You brood of vipers [you bunch of snakes]! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance! Don't say to each other 'we are somebody – we are children of Abraham' [or we're Lutherans!] – because that doesn't mean a thing! An ax is already lying at the foot of the tree; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." How's that for a church growth strategy? But the crowd must have loved it, because they kept coming! And realizing their sins, they asked him, "What then should we do?"

Harsh words for his audience, to be sure. But John the Baptist didn't worry about his pension plan, or sending kids to college, or even his next meal – remember, he ate locusts and wild honey in the wilderness, and was beholden to no one except God. So John the Baptist could say whatever he want, and did not fear the repercussions. You will also remember that John's accusations against King Herod for adultery ended up with John in jail, ultimately beheaded and served on a silver platter at the king's dinner party. But for now, the crowds were inspired by his sermons out in the wilderness, moved to repentance and flocked to him to be baptized.

What should they do in repentance for their sins? They should turn around, change their lives and their ways, by following God's Law. Those who had two coats, should share one with someone who had none. Those who were tax collectors should stop taking bribes or skimming off the top. Those who were soldiers should stop threatening the people in their path, and surely stop the practice of extortion by threats or false accusations. You see, the tax collectors, soldiers, and others guilty of collaboration with the Romans or bribery were very aware of their sins, repented of them, and sought to do what was right by God – for fear of judgment and eternal punishment. But those who didn't realize their sins, who were blind to the harm that the Temple system of taxation was doing to the people, who thought their identity as faithful Pharisees or priests would protect them from God's judgment – THOSE were the ones whom John the Baptist called "a brood of vipers". His anger and accusation were mostly directed at them. But without repentance, there was no way out. For any one of them – or us

– who point out the shortcomings of others but are blind to our own sins, will find ourselves unable to find salvation or comfort in the good news of the gospel. For the good news that John proclaimed is beyond the grasp of those who are “spiritually blind” and unable to repent or “turn around”.

So when those who were inspired by John’s message wondered whether he might be the Messiah promised by God, John answered by saying no – he just baptized them with water, but someone else was coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. He would judge their fruits like a farmer harvesting grain, with a winnowing fork to gather the good wheat and cast the chaff into unquenchable fire. “So with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”

Good news. Did Luke just call this “good news?” Warnings of judgment and unquenchable fire doesn’t sound like good news to us. But then, think about it. Prophets throughout the Old Testament would often bring warnings to the people about coming catastrophes, like plagues of locusts or invading armies, which they said were from God. Isn’t a warning “good news” at some level? A warning gives human beings a chance to flee or hide, or to change their ways in order to avoid the wrath to come. This is what John was proposing: for human beings to change their ways before the coming judgment of God. The world as it was would no longer stand, for God was sending a Messiah to make all things new. So, repent, and bear fruit that is worthy of repentance. Change your lives, do evil no more, but rather, do the right thing, following the path of God.

The other part of the good news, of course, was John’s proclamation that a Messiah was coming, who would bring God’s justice and God’s peace to this world, to replace the corruption of Herod’s court, the harsh, brutal justice of the Romans, and the *Roman pax* that came with a sword and a cross. How would Jesus overcome the violence and domination that disguised itself as peace? By proclaiming God’s word of repentance, compassion, forgiveness, and love to the point of giving up his life on a cross for the sake of the world.

But this peace wouldn’t come easy. Many followers of this Messiah, Jesus, would die a death like his, for the sake of proclaiming this good news of hope in God’s coming kingdom. The apostles and many martyrs of the early Church were arrested, brought before magistrates, lost their homes or their businesses, were separated from their families, and many also were killed in great persecutions ordered by the emperors of Rome. For to proclaim allegiance to God before the Emperor was treason. To be baptized in the name of Jesus was an act of insurrection. To sing Mary’s *Magnificat* was a song of rebellion against the rulers and the way that things were.

Last week we learned of St. Nicholas, who was imprisoned but survived the persecution ordered by the Emperor Diocletian in the early fourth century. Today we hear of another early saint and martyr: Lucy, who lived at the same time as Nicholas, but was born in the city of Syracuse, on the island of Sicily. Lucy was born to wealthy parents: a Roman father and a Greek mother, who raised her as a Christian. Lucy's father died when she was young. Her mother arranged for Lucy to be married to a pagan suitor, but Lucy vowed never to marry an unbeliever. According to legend, her mother became very ill, but was healed after kneeling in prayer at the grave of St. Agatha (who had been martyred 62 years earlier). In gratitude, Lucy ended her engagement and gave away her dowry and jewels to the poor. Her enraged suitor denounced Lucy as a Christian to the Roman authorities, and so she was imprisoned and tortured. But Lucy would not renounce her faith, or make sacrifices to the Roman gods. She was tortured with burning oil and with fire, her eyes were gouged out, and finally she was stabbed to death. Word of Lucy's courage, faith, and martyrdom spread quickly and in the sixth century she was made a saint. Her feast day is celebrated today, on December 13th, which was the winter solstice according to the old Julian calendar. In the 10th century missionaries brought Christianity to Sweden and Norway; perhaps they came with stories of St. Lucy that inspired the faithful. King Canute declared that her saint day would begin a month-long celebration of Christmas, the feast of God's light come into the world. People in Norway and Sweden continue to celebrate St. Lucia Day in their homes, with young girls carrying trays of saffron buns, wearing wreaths of candles on their heads – remembering St. Lucy who, according to legend, brought food to hungry Christians who were hiding in tunnels, lighting her way with candles on her head so that her hands were free to carry bread.

Why should we remember St. Lucy today, or the life-changing words of John the Baptist, and the lives and deaths of the early martyrs in this season of Christmas and holiday preparation? It goes far beyond enjoying cultural traditions and Christmas treats. By remembering Lucy, we recall the story and witness of a young woman long ago, whose life was changed by the good news of Jesus Christ, who was willing to even die before renouncing her faith. Though legends may elaborate her story, the element of this truth remains. Lucy risked her life to witness to her Christian faith, and acted on it by feeding the poor and persecuted Christians in hiding. This witness continues to those Christians who assisted runaway slaves in the Underground Railroad, and those who risked their lives in Nazi Germany to hide and protect Jews during World War II. What are you and I willing to risk as people of faith today, when immigrant families are separated by

archaic and broken immigration policies, when people in our own cities are hungry or homeless or jobless? What then should we do, when we know how often we ourselves fall short in faith and courage? How do we witness to our faith when many in the world around us have lost their faith, or are simply seeking riches or material gain? How do we witness to faith and hope in God this Advent season when we have so many worries and concerns ourselves, when our own families or friends may be losing hope?

We do it simply by continuing to hold to our faith, and being the Church together. By trusting in God, and worshiping on the Lord's Day, by celebrating Christ's birth with joy and hope. By imitating the faith of the saints, being generous to the poor, comforting those who suffer, and working for justice in our land, workplaces and communities. So listen to the words of Paul, who despite being in prison himself, wrote his most helpful letter to Christians in Philippi, urging them to hold on to hope and trust in God:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do 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 our Lord. Now THAT's good news! Amen.