

The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 12, 2021  
Zephaniah 3:14-20  
Philippians 4:4-7  
Luke 7:18-35

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

John was no shrinking violet. No one who is called to speak truth to power could be. It takes a certain type of courage, a love for truth and disregard for the personal consequences, to criticize those who have arbitrary power, those who can act with impunity. John serves as a bridge between the work of God with the people of Israel, from Abraham to Moses and Aaron, to the priests and prophets, to the common people who made the trek into the wilderness to hear what he had to say. The prophets in Israel had a unique role among the people. The priests were primarily concerned with avoiding the profanation of the grounds of the Tabernacle and the Temple. They were concerned with the distinctions between life and death, the holy and the profane, the fitting and the excluded. The office of priest was not supposed to be a political office, although, it did become one during the Hasmonean era. To avoid the politicization of the office, it was originally a birthright position held by the children of Aaron. No one could aspire to the office. The priestly office was one that could be ethically carried out, but social concerns were addressed by another office holder in the political structure of Israel.

It was the prophets who served as a check on political power. Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Hosea, Malachi, all spoke truth to the political powers of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah; they criticized kings and queens and religious leaders alike. In addition to speaking to the political powers, they spoke to the ethical and moral aspects of life under the covenant Israel had made with God at Sinai. Prophets addressed areas of religious concern and matters of the state. They were not Jeffersonian Democratic-Republicans, no separation of church and state here. As God's chosen people, Israel was to take its responsibility to the rest of humanity seriously, and yet, the prophets consistently railed against the unfair treatment of their own, and against the exploitative treatment of the strangers. Israel was commanded to love neighbor and stranger alike. Prophets had to be independent, bold risk-takers with a dangerous penchant for telling it like it is. The last thing you would want in a prophet was someone blown by the winds like a reed or who could be convinced to put their material interests above the real needs of the itching ears of the polis. The personality required for such a role would have to be a little wild, a little eccentric – a little punk rock.

John was as bold as they come. He was unorthodox for the time, especially if the speculation about him is accurate. Many have connected John the Baptizer with the Essenes. The Essenes were a group of around 4,000 ascetic Jews who didn't marry, didn't have children, though they did bring children into their community by adoption, didn't drink, rejected the rites of the Temple, developed their own sacrificial system, practiced a baptism of purification, and shared possessions in common.<sup>1</sup> The Essenes came from an apocalyptic tradition which saw radical religious reform as the mark of the messiah. Perhaps this tradition helps explain John's questioning of Jesus' messiahship.

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* (2:8)

Having such a potential background, it wouldn't be overly surprising that John would have been willing to criticize Herod for illegitimately marrying Herodias. It was this criticism that landed John in prison under Herod, and it eventually led to his murder. While he was in prison, John seems to have been wondering just what to make of Jesus. After all, Jesus Himself had declared that He would be the one to set the prisoners free. Yet, there was John, the forerunner to the Messiah, behind bars, under the authority of an arbitrary ruler, and facing death in the near future. John's questions about Jesus were pretty much the same as the questions the rest of Judah and Israel had about Jesus. So, John sent some of his own disciples to Jesus to ask if He was the One, the promised Messiah.

Generations had long awaited the arrival of the Messiah. The history of the relationship between God and His people was a bit tumultuous. The kingdom was divided after the death of Solomon, the Northern tribes were sent into exile by the Assyrians, the kingdom of Judah was conquered some time later by the Babylonians, then they were ruled by the somewhat tolerant Persians under Cyrus, then by the Greeks, and after the turmoil of the Maccabean revolt, which actually led to the rise of the Hasmoneans and the rebellion of the Pharisees, the Romans took over control of the region. Hope and despair, liberty and oppression, fidelity and rebellion – the history of Israel is one of the greatest sagas known to man. The time of fulfilment had come, but one could understand why there were people who had suspicions about Jesus. There were false messiahs before and false messiahs after the real Messiah, Jesus. Why should people put their faith in Jesus, this controversial Teacher who endorsed the religious activities of a renegade but remained relatively orthodox in His own practice? John was in prison, which appears to be motivation enough, but it would not be in keeping with his personality to suddenly doubt Jesus just because of his own circumstances.

What is at least possible is that John was partially concerned for the sake of his own disciples whom he had directed to follow Jesus as the Messiah. John was not a hapless rebel, tramping after the latest religious fads. He was the forerunner to the Messiah, yet like anyone who thinks seriously about the consequences of their actions, he began to wonder if he had led others astray. Of course, this implicitly presumes that his own doubts had taken a hold as well. So, John sent some disciples off to ask a simple question: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus' response actually answers John's question directly, but only if John's question was not for himself alone. All of the activities Jesus recounts are things that the Messiah was supposed to do according to Isaiah.<sup>2</sup> What was radical about Jesus was the ambiguous role He fulfilled as Messiah. He was neither the radical overthrower of orthodoxy some Jews wanted, nor was He the political redeemer of Israel. (He does overthrow Rome. Christianity becomes dominant, but it takes a few hundred years to happen.) Perhaps the sending of John's disciples can be read as John wavering in his faith because of the situation he was in. I don't believe that was the only motivation though. John knew the risks of criticizing Herod, and he understood the potential consequences. What was done to John was what political tyrants have always done to their critics. Jesus was responding in a way that addresses the concerns of anyone who heard the gospel then or who reads Luke today. In other words, what Jesus said to John at that time is meant to comfort us the same way it was meant to comfort John and John's disciples. Jesus then turned His attention to the crowd in order to explain why John was in prison.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 29:18, 35:5-6, 66:1-2, and implied in Isaiah 11:1-2

A Jewish parable was that of the Reed and the Oak Tree. A reed and an oak tree were planted by a river. When the slightest winds would come, the oak would not bend, but the reed would sway to and fro. For the most part, the deep roots and strong branches of the oak could withstand the winds without bending. However, because of the refusal to bend, the oak could lose its roots because when powerful winds came along, the tree would be torn from the ground. The reed could survive by bending. A prophet of compromise could survive as well, but John was like the oak, and he could be imprisoned and killed. But this oak was the prophet foretold by Micah who would prepare the way before Christ.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the same would happen to Jesus in His crucifixion, for the kingdom comes through righteous suffering. Jesus goes on to say that nothing would be good enough for the contemporary generation. John was ascetic, but that struck most people as a sign that he was a bit crazy. Jesus enjoyed life. He was the opposite of the resentful, life-denying, self-punishing, and guilt-ridden religious extremist. This earned Him the reputation of being a little too loose with women, and sinners, and enemies of the people.

As is so often the case, people are made uncomfortable by their betters, so they pick on whatever they can to tear them down. And while this is true of everyone in every age, it was particularly true of the people of Israel in the time of Jesus. The reason the Temple was destroyed according to the rabbis was the gratuitous hatred held among the Jews for their fellow Jews. Are we on guard against this in the Church? Have we made room for the Johns and the Jesuses? Those who might be a little off kilter, a little outside of a perceived orthodoxy, just might have something important to teach us. Sometimes I am puzzled, even troubled by the arguments taken up, not just in interdenominational discussions, but in intradenominational ones. The arguments frequently are not really about truth but are about tearing down others for having a different view. This is not in keeping with the tradition we come from which saw questioning as a sign of respect and expression of different opinions as necessary for gaining insight and a better understanding. I am not advocating for us to be reeds in the wind. Nor am I saying we should set aside our differences as irrelevant. But the time has come for us to come to terms with the truth that those who will confess the name of Christ alongside us in the most difficult times will not all be from the LCMS, and many of those who we think are oaks will prove to be reeds.

The most important question for us is, how do we avoid becoming reeds? That ancient oak, John the Baptizer reminds us of the way. Repentance. Repentance that is unmitigated, unflinching, and unguarded. Repentance that sees Jesus on the cross as the objective Redeemer of all mankind. Repentance that sees a reflection of the image of God in our neighbor. Repentance that sees the image of God reflected in the stranger. Repentance that understands the log sticking out of our own eyes, and the foolishness of judging others for the specs we spot in theirs. Repentance that relies entirely on the grace of God in Christ, not only in words, but in a humble spirit. Repentance from the spirit of arrogance that brings about destruction, not for being reasonably firm, but for being inflexible or unaccommodating, even among those who are our friends, allies, and fellow sojourners in Christ. Christ's return is approaching, and we will soon find ourselves more closely knit together than we allow ourselves to be now.

I couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of joy and sadness when attending Roman Catholic services in Nigeria. Being with my brothers and sisters in Christ, separated by oceans, languages, nationalities, race, and class, I knew that we were united by something much deeper, more transcendent than anything physical, and that is faith in Christ. But we didn't commune together. Out of respect for their tradition as much as my own, I didn't approach the altar. Still, I

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<sup>3</sup> Micah 3:1

longed for the time when we would share that blessed meal of God's unifying grace in heaven. Not because I want to be Roman Catholic, but because I know that we are truly one in Christ.

May the sad divisions among us in the church cease. The season of Advent is one of hope. We await the return of our Messiah, when the work of redemption which He brought to completion on the cross will be brought to its ultimate end in the unity of His body. We are all baptized into the same name, the same faith, the same new birth, and we all have the same God and Father. We all pray the same prayer - come quickly, Lord Jesus. We pray this, not because things are uncomfortable for us, though things are certainly not easy all the time. We pray this on behalf of others, that their suffering would be brought to an end, and the life Christ has won for them and for us can be fully realized.

In the meantime, let us live life in the deepest sense. Let us live where true life is found. Let us gather where His holiness hallows the ground we touch and the food we eat and the wine we drink. Let us wash where holiness is found in the waters, sanctified by the Word made flesh. Let us kneel at the utterance of the most Holy name in which we have forgiveness of sins, redemption from death, and freedom from the bonds of oppressive guilt. In Christ Jesus, we have the High Priest of mankind, providing for and protecting the holiness of His Temple where He dwells. In Christ Jesus, we have the Prophet who calls us to walk in the way He trod, perfectly loving all while remaining firm, even on the oak of the cross. In Christ Jesus, we have the righteous King of Peace, who guards over His flock and saves us from the threats to our very souls. In Him we are one, for He is the One who binds us together in Himself.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.