

Luke 3:7-18

⁷John said to the **crowds that came out to be baptized by him**, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear 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.** ⁹Even now the ax 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.” ¹⁰And the crowds asked him, “**What then should we do?**” ¹¹In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, **what should we do?**” ¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, “**And we, what should we do?**” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. Amen.

Holy God, by your Spirit speak to us your Word. We open our hearts to receive it as your clarifying, confronting, challenging word of grace, and we ask for faith and courage to respond in love with obedience. Amen.

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If the words that we heard today are John's idea of good news, I'm not sure I want to hear the bad news. How about you? John comes preaching in the style of a fire-and-brimstone prophet, announcing judgment, fire, calling for repentance, and heralding the coming Messiah. All in all, it's a pretty sober message, beginning with the less-than-endearing sermon-opener, “You brood of vipers...” and ending with the seriously ominous “...and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Ouch. It sounds scary and unpleasant. John's rhetoric is neither polite nor gentle. It is hard for me to call it good news.

But I have something to show you...Look at this stone. What good can a stone do? It can be a piece in a wall ... or something for a sculptor to carve ... or for a garden to decorate, or a part of a foundation for a house. Stone is cold, it is hard and it's solid and it seems insensitive. A stone cannot change by itself and I guess that's why a stone is not considered to be alive. If we hear: “you have a heart of stone”, we don't take it as a compliment, do we?

So, maybe John is—in this wildly dramatic fashion which we don't like —trying to get people's attention and to make us see our deepest selves, our hearts - that has hardened us, that which has made us cold and afraid to share a true compassion and love, that which has stopped us or makes us afraid to feel and mainly - express our feelings and show that we are fully alive. That's what I hear – John's insisting: look at yourself. He warns them: “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor.’” Or other words: don't assume that because you have a religious heritage, you belong to God's people. If you come to be baptized, if you are

willing to have a new start, then notice what you have to transform in yourself, what needs to be done to make our hearts of stone into a living child of God.

There is this one question that keeps repeating in today's Gospel reading over and over: what should we do? What should we do to avoid all of this that sounds so harsh in our ears as punishment? What should we do to avoid of being a nation with a heart of stone, following only the great achievers, the powerful ones, where everything more or less is based on gaining more success and wealth. What should we do to avoid being a church with a heart of stone that excludes or fears others, one that is looking for failures, mistakes, and shortcomings in others? What should we do to grow from an individual with a heart of stone to the child of God? And John tells them and tells us as well. To the crowd he says: share evenly what you have. To the tax collectors he says: take only what is fair. To the soldiers he says: don't extort. Reducing these John's answers to more everyday language it could sound as: share, be fair, don't oppress others. It is actually the teaching that we try to pass to our kids while they are playing on a playground. So, why do we have to relearn again something that we at some point in some form already know?

I really don't think that in today's reading John or Jesus are sorting out the good people from the bad ones, condemning us in fire if we don't reach their expectations. No, my deeply held belief is that there is no one beyond the reach of God's redemption, there is no one beyond the reach to be washed in baptism and returning and no one beyond receiving Spirit. It is offered to all of us. What I hear in today's message is that John invites us to sort out what is worth keeping in me and tosses aside all the rest, John invites us to take time and sort out, to sift through what is good and what is not so good in me. Work with the good one and wash away that needs to be washed in baptism waters. And yes, most of the time that process is awfully uncomfortable. But the good news is that God is willing to do it. No matter the effort it takes, no matter the time it takes. And that definitely is good news.

One is clear that Advent is not for the arrogant and powerful to enter. That's why we hear those harsh words coming from John's mouth. We and our ego have to stoop low to enter the stall to meet the newborn Jesus. A cold heart will not hear Jesus crying.

"What should we do?" "What can I do? When we ask a direct question, God gets very specific and gives direct answers. So, maybe "What can I do? is one of the most important questions of life to ask to God and in our Advents? If you and I are the temples where God resides then maybe the only sacrifice required is from us? Then the only sacrifice is a work within us? Do we like this answer, is another question.

Maybe you have already heard the story that once there was a man who was sleeping at night in his cabin when suddenly his room filled with light and the Savior appeared. The Lord told the man that He had work for him to do, and showed him a large rock in front of his cabin. The Lord explained that the man was to push against the rock with all his might. This the man did, day after day. For many years he toiled from sun up to sun down, pushing against the unmoving rock.

Each night the man returned to his cabin sore and worn out, feeling that his whole day had been spent in vain. Seeing that the man was showing signs of discouragement, Satan decided to enter the picture placing thoughts into the man's mind such as: "You have been pushing against that rock for a long time, and it hasn't budged. Why kill yourself over this? You are never going to move it." This gave the man the impression that the task was impossible and that he was a failure.

And the man said in his prayer: "Lord, I have labored long and hard in your service, putting all my strength to do that which you have asked. Yet, after all this time, I have not even budged that rock. What is wrong? Why am I failing?" To this the Lord responded compassionately, "My child, when long ago I asked you to serve me and you accepted, I told you that your task was to push against the rock with all your strength, which you have

done. Never once did I mention to you that I expected you to move it. Your task was to push. Look at yourself. Your arms are strong and muscled after the hard work. Through opposition, you have grown much stronger. Yet you haven't moved the rock. But your calling was to be obedient and to push and to exercise your faith and trust in My wisdom. This you have done. I, my child, will now move the rock. And God moved the rock. "

Sometimes God's task seems impossible. If God sees that we are trying to work with our heart of stones, He will give us help. I really think that only Jesus' burning fire, as pointed out in today's scripture, radically transforms all our identities and our hearts, it enflames our hearts with a passionate desire for God's justice and mercy – not just for ourselves but for the world around us. The cold stone warms up in the flames of His Spirit.

And when that happens, even without noticing, we are able to share. Share our possessions, share our time, share our energy, our attention, and share ourselves with others. Share your coat with another – give them your understanding, compassion, acceptance. Imagine there is a coat in your closet called 'patience'. What if we could wrap another person in that coat? Am I willing to share that? John is inviting us: Keep your empathy alive. Our willingness to share our heart with others becomes a blessing for everybody involved. Last week on Thursday we held Senior Christmas Luncheon that was done by sharing our love and respect for our seniors. And the outcome was a blessing for everyone involved.

Behave in ways that are fair and just, says John. In my daughter's school there is a poster on the wall saying: "Fairness is when every child receives what she or he needs. Fairness is not everyone getting the same thing." I had to think about it. Be fair and just and give others what they need. Everybody's needs should be met. This leads me to notice what the other is needing. If I wish freedom and peace for myself and my loved ones, I wish and pass freedom and peace also to those with whom God has connected to me. If I desire for goodness in my life then justly I will wish that goodness also to those who are so different from me. I guess, being just and fair means to become honest and wholehearted.

Don't oppress, says John. If I put my heavy rock load on something it will feel as I am controlling, stopping, destroying. In our everyday life I have seen and you have seen how we put heavy stones on each other and oppress others with our own self righteousness and inner pride and fear and dislike. Nothing wants or is able to grow under the heavy stones. John encourages us to lift that up and not to drop it into somebody's garden.

John's call is not only a call to awareness of our own hearts and their motives, but it's also a call to live out of that awareness.

Because the crowds at the Jordan river called and asked the direct question: what should we do? If we call and ask the same question, we receive the direct answers as well. And in that moment, while being washed in repentance and being warmed by Holy Spirit's flames we understand that there is nothing we have to fear about. We no longer need to feel trapped by the dysfunction within or around us. We no longer need to numb ourselves to the truth into which God is calling us. We have been forgiven and healed and we can pass that to others. We now can embody genuine love, truthful speech and the power of God with others. Then we are ready to enter the stall to meet newborn Jesus. Amen.