

*From Our Fears and Sins
Release Us
Advent 3: Hope for the Community*

by
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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.

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.

Through John's encouragement to repentance, we can begin to imagine the hope for human community that our reading from Zephaniah envisions for us this morning. Addressed to exiles returning from a long season of distress and oppression, the prophecy of Zephaniah makes marvelous divine promises: The distress of the latter days will come to an end. God, the Divine Warrior whose weapon is love will take away the judgment of your sin. God will quiet you and renew you in love. Sorrow and shame will be removed; the lame will be rescued; the scattered will be gathered and brought home. Zephaniah paints an awesome vision of the Coming of God to dwell in human community. The streets of the city will be filled with joy and dancing because God will rule over human life. The people are forgiven; they are freed from fear and filled with joy. From Isaiah to Zephaniah and through the prophets in between, that is the vision of human community God has long held before the people: Dancing for joy in the streets!

The whole New Testament opens with John having carried that vision from the Old into the New. He points us to Jesus of Nazareth, saying the time has come; we need to ready ourselves for the fulfillment of this glorious vision and we have work to do!

John the Baptist comes on strong, undoubtedly, calling his listeners a "brood of vipers" and pointing to the ax at the foot of the tree as a warning to bear the fruit of repentance. With urgency in his voice, John is helping the crowds prepare for the long-awaited Messiah. "Don't say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor...'" is John's way of saying, God doesn't "grandfather you in" automatically! What God cares about is what you are producing, and with Jesus on the way, it is time for you to give an accounting.

We would never ask this man to be on the front line of welcoming new members! We would never let him usher or station him as a greeter at the door! But you know what? That is exactly what God has done! God has put John in charge of inviting people into God's vision for a more civil society where, freed from all manner of fear, people are

living the life God intends. Given the harshness of how John conveyed his message, the amazing thing is that people flocked to him by the thousands. There was something about his fierce rhetoric that attracted them. They knew things had to change in order to live into God's vision. Amid all the voices clamoring for their attention, they were trying to discern the voice of God, and they perceived God's word had come to John.

Undeterred then by John's hellfire and brimstone preaching, the crowd pushes him to be more plain spoken, and to give them some examples of how to respond to his call to repentance. When the followers of John pin him down and say "What should we do?" Suddenly, at the far end of their question, the wide-eyed religious fanatic turns practical. The loud, bellowing voice softens. The raging prophet becomes exceedingly pastoral. John gives them instructions that are downright doable, achievable, and I would say – even hopeful.

He says, in effect, Do the obvious. Be honest. Make good on your word and tell the truth. Forgive people who have wronged you. Contribute to the welfare of those in need. If you have two coats, give your spare coat away. Share your food with those who otherwise would go hungry. Tax collectors, collect what is due and don't skim off the top. Soldiers, do not rob anyone with threats of violence. To the rest of you, live in such a way that you contribute to your community for the common welfare of all its inhabitants.

Now, perhaps it is not fair to leap from these simple instructions to Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a mentor, but Bonhoeffer said something around this time of the year that rings true to this text. Faced with his own complex decisions about how to behave in a world of rising nationalism, white supremacy, and extraordinary violence, Bonhoeffer wrote about his ethical struggles in a way that helps us understand the demands of the Christian faith. As a young theologian he watched the rise of Adolf Hitler's power, the increasing persecution of the Jews, including members of his own family, and he saw the complicity of the

German church becoming aligned with the horrific ways of the state. After a mighty wrestling match with his own conscience and his deep Christian convictions, he agreed to a plan to assassinate Hitler. As you know, the plot was discovered; Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by the Nazis, and at Christmastime, from his prison cell, he wrote this: “To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way... but to be human (with) the humanity Christ creates in us.”¹

This is the call of John the Baptist; it is the ethic of Christmas. It is our hope for recovering a greater sense of community in our own violent world, fraught with all manner of meanness and division: *to be human with the humanity Christ creates in us*. John the Baptist had howled at the crowd, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” And when the people asked, “How?” With simple examples, John spoke to the inequities of his society, and the greed that feeds those inequities, and told the crowds how to address them in everyday, practical ways, in a language they understood. Nothing fancy. Nothing too difficult to do really – if you put your heart and mind – your Christ-like humanity – into it. If you have more food and clothing than you need, share them. Do your work with integrity and without exploiting other people.

I imagine some of you have seen the story about Tony and Amy D’Orazio and their Carversville Farm. It was a featured “feel good” story on the local news last month around Thanksgiving. Tony is from South Philadelphia and, while Amy and he live on an expansive farm in Bucks County, they have shared an impassioned concern for the urban poor from their college days in Philadelphia. They are entrepreneurs who created a thriving business. They have done quite well and without having to worry about their own livelihood, they have created a non-profit farm that donates ninety percent of its produce and meat to chefs who cater to soup kitchens and food pantries throughout the Philadelphia

¹ Bonhoeffer from *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 361.

and Camden area. The other ten percent goes to a farm stand one day a week that their neighbors asked them to run.

Plenty of farms give a good measure of food away, but Carversville Farm functions more like a dedicated supplier for half a dozen emergency food providers, including our church's partners at Broad Street Ministry. Instead of waiting for donations, these emergency providers get to order what they want each week from the farm; those orders are professionally processed, packed and delivered free of charge and the high quality, fresh produce and protein is then served to those in need. They spend about one and a half million dollars per year to run the farm and, in their 60's, have created a Foundation to fund an endowment and are working out a succession plan to keep it going.

When asked by an interviewer, Tony D'Orazio says he realizes one farm alone is unlikely to solve the complicated problems of hunger and poverty in the region, but he has felt moved to do something different than what's been done before. The idea that people still starve in Philadelphia is unacceptable, he says. "We're just trying to do one little thing."²

One little thing multiplied by the throngs of people who pay attention to John the Baptist adds up! With the humanity that Christ has created within us we can make a hopeful difference in this community. All we need to do is be honest about what we have to share, be faithful, compassionate, and contribute to the welfare of those in need. If you have two coats, give your spare coat away. Share your food with those who are hungry. Little things. Doable things. Achievable things. Hopeful things.

² Rachel Wharton, "Their Produce is Pristine Enough for Picky Chefs, but They Give it Away," *New York Times*, 9/24/21.

Many of you know we have welcomed the Sepah family from Afghanistan who are living for a time in the Foerderer House. The parents arrived with four children, ages 9 years old down to six months. They were a family at high risk in their homeland, and they left behind extended family who continue to need our prayer support.

In the meantime, we have a large group of volunteers helping them get settled, and this will surprise no one: Pastor Rachel has made sure that our children have had a chance to welcome them as well. Rachel and our Sunday School teachers explained that a refugee family will be living in one of the church houses for the next several months. They told the children: they are from Afghanistan and had to leave their country because it wasn't safe to be there. As a church we were going to be their neighbors, help them practice English and get enrolled in schools just like they are. With that simple introduction our children made cards to welcome the Sepah children their own age. The littlest ones created lovely splatters of glitter and some primitive looking Christmas trees. But the fourth and fifth graders wrote these messages to the older two Sepah children:

Welcome to our church. You are awesome. We are so glad to have you here.

Welcome to the United States. We are here to help.

Welcome to our church. We are here to support you along your journey.

Hello and welcome to our church community. We are all very happy to care for you.

Our community is joyful and optimistic, so we all hope that you can settle in this new home. Welcome to our church. You will be safe here. We will get you on your feet. We will look after you. We are your brothers and sisters.

Sounds like our children have heeded the call of John the Baptist and are living with the humanity that Christ creates in us. For the day is surely coming when all of humankind will be freed from sin and fear and dancing in the streets.

AMEN.

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