

“In Your Heart” – Luke 3:7-18 – Advent 3 – Dec 14/03

How are your Christmas preparations coming along? Our lights are up, thanks to Elizabeth, but we're not quite at "the stockings are hung by the chimney with care". With my schedule I'd be inclined just to hang a wreath on the door, some tinsel on a lampshade, and maybe a mistletoe in the kitchen door. I actually noticed that the church is nicely decorated, and I'm grateful to whoever did it while I wasn't looking – it looks beautiful.

I know the rest of the world is singing Christmas carols and bustling around shopping, but I haven't quite gotten into the swing of Christmas yet. Part of the reason for that is that the world and the church are miles apart in how we treat this event. The world around us begins to build to a fever pitch right after the U.S. Thanksgiving, when the stores hold their 'start-of-the-season' sales, television and print ads start to feature Santa's and tree decorations and music. It's not quite as frenetic as it used to be, now that people walk on eggs, trying not to offend anyone. I had the usual experience in Staples this week as the customer ahead of me and the clerk spent at least two minutes negotiating what was a mutually agreeable way to not say, "Merry Christmas". I forget exactly which meaningless platitude they settled on, but it was both interesting and in some ways encouraging to see how far we've come from a department store jingle started in the 1920's.

I say encouraging because it signals to me that in that drifting away from crass commercialism there is a tiny bit of hope that we might drift back to the church's perspective on the whole event. The church for two thousand years now – well, maybe it's a bit less, because it wasn't until we took over the Roman Saturnalia festival that the church really began to celebrate Christmas, so call it 1,600 years – but for a long, long time the church has spent December preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Preparing, not with evergreen trees, for that is a late addition from the dark and brooding forests of Northern Europe long before it was called Europe, but with relating the stories leading up to Jesus' birth. Stories that centered around the strange prophet named John, known to us as John the Baptist, who himself preceded Jesus, and who prophetically announced the impending arrival of one who was God with the people.

John the Baptist was immensely popular. Make no mistake, he had huge crowds of devoted followers, larger crowds than Jesus, some would say. His reputation spread far and wide throughout that end of the Mediterranean basin, probably helped by his appearance and his manner. People notice and pay attention to and remember weird and strangely different individuals. If I wasn't Presbyterian I'd bet there aren't more than a few people here who have no idea who Michael Jackson is, or Sir(!) Mick Jagger – not that I'm lumping them in the same category as John the Baptist, but you know what I mean. Any prophet who dressed in wild skins, ate weird food, and grumped at his followers was both recognized as a prophet, and remembered, and even his message was remembered!

Yes, John the Baptist was hugely popular, with an immense and devoted following. So immense and so devoted, that the question was on many peoples' minds – was he the Messiah? It was a question that lingered for a long time, indeed it is a subtle kind of question that lingers in various forms today. There are many today who, in their search for truth, for meaning in life, adopt a stern and forbidding approach that seems so very like John the Baptist's. Images of harsh and unyielding religious zealots in countries whose names end in 'stan' come immediately to mind. These are, of course, the religious leaders who take particular pleasure in imposing severe rules upon their followers and extreme penalties on those who sin, but there are plenty of people disguised even as Presbyterians who are quick to echo John's "you brood of vipers!" and who take delight in images of Christ dressed like the grim reaper swinging a scythe through the hordes of people who have not expressed their faith with sufficient enthusiasm or zeal.

Yes, John the Baptist had huge followings, and many asked, “are you the Messiah?” Luke felt particularly compelled to answer that question, and he affirmed that John was not the Messiah, or Christ, because Jesus was. Luke carefully quotes John as pointing to one who would come shortly as being the real Christ, one who even John recognized and affirmed as being so much greater than himself that he was unworthy even to tie his sandals.

We even hear John draw a distinction between the baptism he expected his followers to receive, and the baptism that the coming Messiah would offer. “I baptize with water”, John proclaimed, invoking images not only of an outward cleansing the body to accompany the inward cleansing of repentance, but also of near-death experiences, being shoved under the water. “But the one coming will baptize with Spirit and fire”, he continued.

There are wonderful double images associated with that expression. First of all is the set of images that come to our Christian minds, images of that first Pentecost with the Holy Spirit descending upon all in that upper room like tongues of fire, a scene of bright light and divine force. But there’s a second set of images that we derive from the fact that the word translated ‘spirit’ can with equal authority be translated ‘wind’ (and also ‘breath’, but we’ll stay with ‘wind’ here). We hear the wind whistle, and we picture harvesters in fields of golden grain, thrashing the wheat and winnowing it. Recall that the harvesters in Jesus’ and John’s day did not drive big, fancy green or red or orange combines across miles of prairie, processing the wheat, the chaff, weed seeds and straw all in one motorized pass. They cut the grain with a scythe, gathered it into sheaves to dry. Once dried, the wheat was clobbered with sticks to shake the kernels loose and to beat the skins (the chaff) off the kernels. The resulting mix was tossed into the air on a windy day, and the wind blows the light-weight chaff off to one side, and the denser kernels fall straight down. (It still works the same way in a modern combine, except the wind is generated mechanically – how appropriate in this day and age that so much of our life depends on artificially generated wind or spirit!) There are all kinds of wondrous but dangerous images this can provoke for a sermon – hoping that the lightweights get blown away, for example – we won’t even go there, but continue to focus on grain, on wheat, and on the yummy bread and sweet cookies that are the end products of this process.

And that’s at the heart of this story. It’s not so much about the chaff, as it is about being the wheat. We love to move so quickly to the negative, to worry about being the chaff, headed for the fire that heated the ovens, if only briefly. But the urging from John was to concentrate on being the wheat, bringing life and sustenance to others.

And if we go back and look at the essence of John the Baptist’s message with this more positive focus, we discover that his message was in many ways not so different from the message that Jesus proclaimed. We hear three different groups of people respond positively to John, and ask him, “what then shall we do?”, and his answers to all three have a common theme. To the crowds he says, “share what you have with those less fortunate”, not very far removed from Jesus’ commands to “feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick”. To the tax collectors John says, “collect only what you are legally entitled to collect.” To the soldiers John instructs, “do not extort by force, do not be greedy”. Not only do these instructions parallel instructions from Jesus, they all share the same motive of compassion. Sharing clothing, not stealing, not extorting, all three echo the familiar message of “love one another as I have loved you” don’t they? Kind of surprising to realize that this crusty prophet actually proclaimed a message instructing people to let their hearts motivate their actions.

No, John the Baptist was not the Messiah, but in his role of proclaiming the coming of Jesus, the true Messiah, who would become the risen Christ, John proclaimed a message that was similar, a message of placing care and concern for the poor, the powerless into one’s heart. That message is still relevant today, and is especially so as we celebrate the action of God in coming to us in the form of a

helpless, powerless infant born in stable, and laid in a manger, surrounded not by burning chaff but sweet-smelling hay. There's plenty of time in the church year to smell the smoke from the burning chaff, to reflect on the need for repentance. But this is Advent, now is the time to recall that God began the process of sealing his covenant with people in all the tenderness and love that is associated with a newly-born baby. Now is the moment to let our hearts be refilled with all the joy that comes from Immanuel, God with us. This is the season and the time of year, matched only by Easter, to let our hearts overflow with all the love, joy and compassion that we receive from God's Holy Spirit. Now is the time to know in our hearts that we are loved by God, so clearly demonstrated by the birth of his son, Jesus, who in dying and rising again showed He was and continues to be the true Messiah, the Christ.