



SMALL GROUP ADVENT READINGS AND QUESTIONS

Week Two of Advent

Devotional Reading: Luke 3:1-17

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation.’”

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

“What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” He told them, “Don’t collect any more than you are required to.” Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Moment for Reflection

At the time of John the Baptist, expectations for the Messiah are high. As we read last week in the devotional reading by Philip Yancey, Jews are looking for the Messiah in various charismatic figures of the times. At first they think John the Baptist might be the Messiah, but John clarifies that he is the latest of a long line of prophets who have proclaimed the living word of God to kings and commoners alike since Israel’s beginnings as a nation.

After the Jews lost their national independence, the writings of the literary prophets became popular, particularly those writings that predicted that a Messiah would restore the Jewish nation and temple to their former glory. Starting in the time of the last biblical prophet (around 400 BC), political changes such as wars, migrations of people, invasions, and the rise and fall of nations impacted the scattered Jewish communities and stimulated speculation about the coming Messiah.

By Jesus’ time, several schools of Messianic thought and expectations have emerged. Jewish groups focused on the aspects of the Messiah that most closely match their beliefs.

Sadducees, the theological conservatives of the day, conformed to the dominant non-Jewish cultures and placed a high value on social stability. Their primary concern was maintaining national Jewish religious rituals despite Roman occupation. They expected the Messiah to be one of their contemporaries. Some Sadducees even thought Herod might be the Messiah.

Pharisees were the theological legalists who urged everyone to follow the Law of Moses according to their interpretation. Their Messiah would lead this charge.

Two other influential groups– the *Zealots* and the *Essenes*– took opposite approaches. The Zealots wanted to forcefully remove the Romans from power and install a Messiah; the Essenes retreated into the desert, waiting for two Messiahs to come. In this charged atmosphere of conflicting expectations, John the Baptist proclaimed that the Messiah had arrived.

Going Deeper

John the Baptist had a ready-made audience. When he proclaimed the Messiah was coming, he captured the attention of many who would otherwise have thought that he was just a wild man who lived in the desert, wore camel hair, and ate locusts and honey. John's message prepared the way for a Messiah who would not conform to the expectations of the people.

Whereas the Sadducees were looking for a Messiah who would not upset the social order, John proclaimed an upside-down kingdom that challenged the status quo, changing the categories of rich and poor. Whereas the Pharisees were looking for a Messiah who would bring all Jews to full observance of the Law of Moses, John's words were the first hint that Jesus would redefine the Law. Whereas the Zealots were looking for a Messiah who would throw off the yoke of Roman occupation, John's words mentioned nothing about political power. Whereas the Essenes were looking for a Messiah who would approve their commitment to living apart from society and initiate an apocalyptic ending to human history, John instead called them to repentance, baptism, and full engagement with the world.

John the Baptist corrected these most common expectations for the Messiah by teaching his audience (and us) about the importance of sin and repentance. Sin must be called sin. John the Baptist didn't soften his words to keep from hurting someone's feelings. He was particularly frank with his audience. Thus we must be perfectly honest with ourselves in dealing with the sin in our lives.

John also emphasized that repentance is necessary. The type of repentance to which John the Baptist called people differed from the Old Testament tradition, which centered on a liturgy in which the assembly or nation as a whole fasted, lamented, and confessed their sin. John's called to repentance required an interior conversion in which the person showed kindness, humility, and a commitment to justice. John called his listeners to an authentic change of heart that manifested itself in baptism. In asking for repentance, John (and later Jesus), called individuals to reconsider their priorities and ways of thinking about how to live in the world, and to adjust their lives accordingly. That call to repentance was intimately connected to the arrival of the kingdom of God in the coming of the Messiah.

John the Baptist thought that a genuine conversion of the heart will express itself in outward actions. He cited several things that we will do when our heart has changed: share our clothing and food with those in need, be honest in our monetary transactions, refrain from extortion, tell the truth, and be content with our wages (in other words, avoid greed). These are only some examples of the many ways that our actions change when we experience a truly converted heart.

Finally, our religious heritage will not put or keep us in the right relationship with God. This, John exclaims, requires personal repentance and bearing good fruit, which is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Questions for Reflection

1. What language from John the Baptist's message in Luke 3 is most shocking to you? Most hopeful?
 - a. Why do parts of John the Baptist's message sound so harsh to our 21st Century ears?
 - b. Do you think there is still a place for this kind of language in our own context? If so, what does this look like? If not, how do we adapt our style without changing the content of the message?
2. We all have personal expectations for what the Messiah *should* be, even now. Can you describe a moment when a story or teaching of Jesus (or about Jesus) challenged your expectations?
3. How does the content of this devotional reading align with content from worship this past Sunday?
4. Share your prayer concerns with one another. As you bring your time together to a close, have one group member slowly read the passage from Luke 3. Allow a quiet moment to meditate on its meaning, then close your time in prayer.