

Sermon on 3AdventC: Luke 3:7-18

Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship on 12-17-06 by Pastor David Van Kley

## HEARTS WIDE OPEN

We see him today, surrounded by hand-painted signs that say “the end is near” and “repent now:” a man with an untrimmed beard, dressed in a grimy leather vest. He unleashes a torrent of words: “You nest of snakes! What were you thinking—that you could get away from the fire of judgment by slithering in here?” “Forest of bug-killed trees! Think you can escape the logger’s axe by listening to **me**? Don’t you go waving your Lutheran cards; God could care less. **Show** you’re serious by living justly! Or else!”

Why **do** we come out to listen to this man, us and the whole Christian Church, every third Sunday in Advent? Why let him call us names? Who invited him here anyway, on the day of the children’s Christmas program? He’s the proverbial square peg in a round hole.

Yet something compels us to listen. Some power, the power of truth, perhaps. Sometimes, we **are** the hypocrites he says we are. In many ways, the world **is** the mess he calls it. The trouble with John the Baptist is that he puts his finger on the truth.

He’s like a rogue doctor, who’s stolen a fistful of x-rays from the clinic. Look,” he says, pointing at something. “See that? The artery is 95% blocked. Here, this one is 70%. That one over there is 40%. You’re a walking time bomb, Mister. Ms. The problem’s right, **there**; see it?”

And we can’t help but look, because when you’ve had an x-ray, you want to know the results even if the news is bad.

“Here’s the thing,” John says. “Some people have closets full of coats; others have none. Some have pantries full of food; others don’t even have pantries. Some live on less than \$1 per day, others make thousands of dollars per **hour**. It’s obvious why you’ve got problems. See, its right, **there**!”

We recall Mary’s song: “God has brought the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” She was singing about the child she was chosen to bear! Yet, Christmas in America is not about stocking the pantries and filling the closets of the poor; its about spending a great deal on merchandise for those who already have more than enough.

This is a big political weekend in Washington, marking the transfer of power from one secretary of defense to another. For months, we’ve heard all the complicated arguments about the causes of terrorism and war—where our government is right and wrong. But for John, it’s not complicated. “See,” he says, holding up an x-ray. “There it is. Not enough love. Your world is a loveless place. That’s the problem right, **there**.”

He holds up another x-ray and says, “Anxiety is the spiritual disease of your time and place. You worry about all the things you have to do. Worry that you won’t have enough money. Worry about what other people think of you. Anxiety is an alarm clock that won’t stop ringing in your ears. John calmly circles the artery, pinpoints the problem. “There it is,” he says; “right, **there.**”

There are many x-rays in his hand, each unique and yet all of them similar. John gives every blockage the same name, using a word few of us use any longer in polite conversation. **Sin**, he calls these things. The plaque in our spiritual veins is **sin**.

We hate listening, but can’t help it.

“What should we do?” we say.

It’s like asking a dietician what to do. She doesn’t have enough fingers. “Watch your diet. Lose weight. Don’t eat fatty foods. Exercise. Take your medication. Avoid stress.”

John doesn’t mind telling us what to do. “Give away some of the coats in your closet. Don’t accumulate things you don’t need. Don’t cheat on your taxes. Live within your means. Give of yourself, as some did yesterday, serving dinner to the community, wrapping gifts for the less privileged, stocking the food pantry. Travel to Nicaragua or Guatemala, make friends on the reservation: build bridges between peoples! Stop worrying and start praying. Make your requests known to God. Give thanks.” Just do it!

In fits and starts, we may seek to follow this advice. Yet, even as we stop bad habits and start doing good things, we have this uneasy feeling that it’s not enough. In some ways, the harder we try to do what is right the more keenly aware we are of what is wrong. “Is that **all?**” we ask John. “Will this make me righteous? Will this change the world? Are **you** the Messiah?”

John answers clearly, as always. “No. Doing good things is only a start. And no, I’m **not** the Messiah. There’s one more powerful than I coming, the thong of whose sandal I’m not worthy to untie...I baptize with water; he with the Holy Spirit and with fire. I can tell you what to do, but he can change you.”

John is like a general practitioner making a referral: “the bottom line is, there’s no way either you or I can fix the problem. You must see the surgeon, down the hall. She’s the one with the scalpel. It’s amazing what she can do! Pry your heart wide open, take it out and tinker with it. Strip a vein from your leg and splice it to your artery, bypassing the blockage, so that the blood can flow again, and your whole body can thrive. I’ll be honest: it’s painful. It’s expensive. And it will require your effort. But surgery is necessary. I’m sending you down the hall.”

We who've attended church before know, of course, that John is talking about **Jesus**. Jesus has the power to forgive sins, so that they no longer weigh us down with guilt or shame. He has the power to turn hate into grace, war into peace, death into life. As we live into both his promises and commands, like a surgeon, he bypasses our selfishness, so that love flows freely. Bypasses fear, so that trust gets through. "Its all possible," John says, though not without pain and expense and effort. "I'm sending you down the hall to the Son of God."

It's the third Sunday of Advent and we are waiting to celebrate Christmas. Waiting to sing "Joy to the World, the Lord is Come." It is good to confess our sins and to try to change our sinful behavior while we wait, just as it is good to change your habits while you wait for heart surgery.

Last week, Pastor Kent called us "Advent people"—people who live in the tension between promise and fulfillment. We live with all kinds of pain and disappointment, some of which we bring upon ourselves and some of which just happens. because the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire has not yet fully come. We're like the people, Kent said, who crawled out of bombed out houses in Warsaw after World War II. We're like the people of New Orleans who climbed out of their flooded attics after Katrina and stood on rooftops, waiting for the helicopters.

We're like people who have an appointment with the surgeon, but we don't know the date or the time.

And yet. On this third Sunday in Advent, we also confess that the One we're waiting for **has** come. He came 2000 years ago to Mary and Joseph and has never left us. In the waters of baptism, he pours out upon us the gift of the Holy Spirit. Today, as Shane Nupen/Tristan Spring is baptized, all of Christ's gifts are given with this Spirit. When you and I were baptized, all of Christ's gifts were given to us as well. We need only claim them this day and every day. And begin to live them.

In this sense, baptism **is** our bypass surgery and life is our rehab and the whole world is on the road to its joyful recovery! Amen.