

## **GET SET; LUKE 3:7-18; ADVENT III; DECEMBER 13, 2009; THY/WPC**

You don't expect the Gospel of Luke – a gospel of compassion, healing and justice for the poor – to begin with fire and brimstone.

This is the gospel that tells of a God who is like a tender, forgiving father of a son who burns through his inheritance on sex, drugs and alcohol; it's the gospel where God is the host of a big party to which all the street people have been invited.

So to find here such harsh words is a bit of a surprise. 'The kingdom of God is coming,' John said 'if you don't shape up God will give you the axe like a blighted elm; or toss you into the incinerator like what's left over when you've lambasted the good out of the wheat.'

But it's not just the pointed language, it's to whom he is speaking. Luke says John was addressing the crowds when he issued that ram's horn wake-up call: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

That term "crowds" is all inclusive. John was referring not just to the power elite, or corrupt councilmen or seminary deans or greedy money managers, John was calling all of them rich, poor and in between alike: snakes.

The message today is that if God's reign is ever going to come to our marriages and families, our city and neighborhoods, our nation and world, and to our churches, synagogues and mosques then it has to start with each one of us. Realizing and acting on that is how to get set in Advent.

What I'm saying today is that each of us is implicated. There is no where to hide whether you're under his soul-piercing gaze or hearing this story 2,000 years later for the first time. John's long, bony finger points directly at you and me.

If you're thinking something like 'this close to Christmas and he's telling me I've been picked out of a lineup, that's not why I came today,' that's OK. John's listeners were a little defensive, at first, too. It would be like a doctor walking into a medical consultation being told she's the one who needs the diagnosis.

Jesus said he came to heal not those who were well but those who were sick. Yet the language of spiritual illness today is a lost language. There's a popular idea that if we don't use that language, sin will go away. But abandoning the language of sin simply leaves us speechless before its effects and increases our denial of its presence in our lives.

I remember, for example, when our sons were teenagers and more than a challenge for my budding parenting skills. So I focused on what was wrong with their behavior and reminded myself, if not them, that I had important and laudable work to do as a pastor.

They got the message – Dad's unwilling to look at himself. Not to distract you with my learning curve as a parent – I mention this to say that I only felt like I began to 'get it,' – and I don't mean just parenting – when I realized I had to take a hard look at myself. Though I'm amazed how easy it is to forget this.

Nevertheless, to my surprise my sons got it too. Finally, I was giving them an example, not perfect by any stretch, of a member of the male species trying to take an honest look at his life. It wasn't long before they followed suit, began to look at themselves and make positive changes.

What I'm saying is that life gives everyone of us an opportunity to face ourselves head on. No one is exempt from the opportunity or the need. There isn't any person, or nation, or religion, or government or non-profit that doesn't need to face its own life.

What's so valuable today is that Luke helps us deal with the age-old problem of pointing our finger at other people or groups when we think of the change needed to make a better world: China's pollution; Obama's largesse; Republican elitism; City Hall's inefficiency. And just when we're feeling a little self-righteous waiting to hear John take it to the religious authorities and Roman oppressors John says we're as much a part of the problem as they are.

"Do not 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." It doesn't matter how many degrees we have or where we got them, where we live, what our bank account is, what clubs we belong to or cars we drive, our life is in mortal danger unless we make a u-turn right now.

John got their attention; at least most of them. But while some came to see him out of curiosity, most were there, in fact, because they were searching, they were sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Something wasn't right and they knew it. The tax collectors were fleecing the people while the occupation army backed them up. Soldiers abused their authority. Religious leaders were controlling bureaucrats.

But beneath all that, spiritual dis-ease in the society was at epidemic proportions. Many were looking for something they didn't have a name for, the symptom of which was a gnawing hunger, not for food, as much as freedom, trust, peace in their relationships and hearts.

Finally they came clean and asked him, "What then should we do?" And do you remember what he said? He said, "whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

Even the tax collectors, Luke says, came to be baptized and asked, "Teacher, what should we do?" And he said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers, too, asked him and he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

It is an oddly everyday and practical list. Absent are any recommendations for diet or exercise or therapy; there are no books to read, DVDs to purchase or mantras to chant; just simple acts helping others who need help to practice and living an honest, contented life.

You get the impression it's what the people needed to hear because immediately they started clamoring, wondering if John was the long-awaited Messiah.

But he made it clear he wasn't, there was one coming, he said, who was greater than he was and would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire.

So John succeeded in his brief appearance on the stage of Christian history. He'd broken through their hard-baked attitudes and hearts. Got them to stop pointing the finger at others and consider that the best place to start reforming was in their own lives.

But sometimes we're blind. Everyday living has a way of gathering momentum, and we accumulate convenient stereotypes and generalizations that help us rationalize why we aren't more honest or faithful or kind.

Then something happens that doesn't allow us to stretch the truth and live with our self-deception any longer. Tiger Woods is just the most recent, dramatic and very public example of what I'm talking about.

But we don't have to have committed the transgressions he did, all we have to do is to listen to some other voice, a voice that permits, even encourages us to choose convenience over struggle, comfort over discomfort, image over honesty; and we will have successfully silenced our own inner voice and God's summons to live the life he gives us.

A diagnosis, loss of a job, a broken relationship or dream – that ram's horn, wake-up call comes in a variety of heart-shattering forms. Or perhaps it's nothing as earth-shaking as that, maybe it's just the simple, almost unnoticeable passing of another year.

The question is whether we will heed that call when it comes – not once but throughout our lives as a summons back to the truth and integrity God's people have found in every generation are the way to deep peace and living well.

That's really the only way I know how to get ready in Advent. I don't mean to ignore placing the poinsettias and trimming the tree – or finding that special gift for a loved one in honor and celebration of the Christ child. And, of course, I am not discounting the food.

What I mean is there's really only one way to prepare *our hearts* for Jesus' coming – and that's by taking a good look at the heart in which we are inviting him to come and live.

We may not like what we think we'll find in our heart of hearts; or maybe we haven't been there for so long we're not sure what we'll find; which is as scary as knowing it's something we won't be pleased with. I speak from experience.

Typically once we start paying attention to our hearts they won't cling to the little or big deceptions very long. They begin letting them go one by one not only because they've been a dead weight but also because it seems what our hearts really thrive on is the truth. Sometimes, of course, it takes a little longer, the old deceptions may forestall the needed change temporarily. But it's a losing battle once we've committed to letting the truth speak to and reshape us.

It's like coming in from the cold and standing by a warm fire – you start feeling your body again – your toes and arms and fingers; you loosen up.

That's what happens when we do the kind of soul-searching John the Baptist called us to do. If we can just get ourselves to that honest question, 'what then should we do?' we'll start hearing things we used to ignore and taking seriously things we thought were unimportant.

Once we've exposed the old deceits, self-destructive habits and ways of thinking about ourselves and others, there's room for Jesus to enter in; and a deep willingness to listen to what he says. Amen.