

“What Should We Do?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Zephaniah 3:14-20 and Luke 3:7-18

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Poor John the Baptist. I have some children’s books that we read to Emerson about grumpiness that might benefit John. All these people come to him, ready to be baptized, ready to hang on his every word, and what does he do? He calls them a “brood of vipers,” and asks them who warned them to flee the “wrath to come.” Somehow I don’t think I’d get away with that—if I stood up here one Sunday morning and called you all vipers. Then again, John does get executed shortly after this lovely speech, so maybe it doesn’t work too well for him either. And seeing as I rather like my head where it is, I think I’ll stick to my loving affirmations. “Welcome home” just has a nicer ring to it, don’t you think, than “brood of vipers”?

Of course, John has a message to get across, and he doesn’t have time to mince words. He needs the people to wake up. He tells them to repent, to live new and transformed lives, and he warns them that having Abraham as their ancestor is no guarantee. This isn’t just for the people out there; this is for church-going folks too; everyone needs to live this way. Because, God is coming into the world, and is about to do a new thing. That new thing will raise up children of God, but it will also cut down any tree that does not bear good fruit.

The people hear this glorious talk, and they ask, “What then should we do?” Three times they ask this question, as their feet sink in the mud of the river where they have come to be baptized. *What should we do to receive the birth of God, to repent and give ourselves to this world transformation?* Should they become prophets like John? Should they give up everything and move into the desert, and pray all day? Should they form a revolution, oust the Romans, reform the temple?

We’ve asked these questions too. We hear the stories of Jesus, experience his grace and love, and we wonder: How can we live up to that? Should we join the Peace Corps? Adopt a life of poverty? Go to seminary and become pastors? Become social revolutionaries?

We often think that God is in only these glorious acts. And they are glorious. There are people like John, like Martin Luther King Jr. and Dorothy Day, who do precisely that, and surely, God is with them. But what about everyone else? Where’s God for the guy working a middle class job living in the suburbs? Where’s God for the single mom holding down several jobs, raising children, who just doesn’t have time to foment a revolution? Where’s God for the person working behind the cash register at Wegmans or coming into the college at 4am to clean toilets or working twelve-hour shifts at the hospital?

We think there are the few spiritual jobs—like mine—and then there’s everything else, the non-spiritual stuff, the Monday through Saturday stuff.

John's answer, then, must have completely surprised them.

He doesn't tell them to become prophets. He doesn't ask anything grand or glorious. He basically tells them the same thing we learned in kindergarten: be nice, share, don't be a bully. He says if you have two coats, give one away. If you have food, share it. But what's really surprising is how he answers the tax collectors and soldiers.

They are oppressing John's people. Some *are* his people, and they are viewed as traitors. Others are Romans or mercenaries from foreign lands. They serve a government that has ground them into desperate poverty. The tax collectors skim off the top, taking what little the people need to survive. The soldiers enforce the taxes, and take the people from their farms and force them to work on building projects. And when a person rebels, it's the soldier who burns their homes, confiscates their livestock, imprisons their relatives, and puts them on a cross, just as they will one day Jesus.

Astoundingly, John doesn't tell them to stop being soldiers or tax collectors. He doesn't tell anyone to quit their jobs. Instead, he calls everyone to acts of service right in the jobs they've got. Be a different kind of tax collector, a different kind of soldier, John says. Be honest and just. Be good and compassionate. Live like God put you in that job for a reason, like maybe you are here to help these people, not hurt them.

Imagine it: the difference a good soldier could make. Or a good tax collector.

Later, in Luke, we won't have to imagine; we will meet him: Zacchaeus who climbed the tree to see Jesus, who tells Jesus that he will make restitution for any fraud he has committed and return half his wealth to the poor.

As Scott Hoezee writes, John "basically sent every person who came to him back to his or her regular life, regular activities, regular vocation and then told each person, 'Do what you've been doing but do it better, do it more honestly, do it as an act of service for others.' So often people don't think they are very spiritual. They don't think that what they do at the factory, in the classroom, around the dinner table matters much... But they are wrong... Everything we do is profoundly spiritual and profoundly important."

I think that's the "good news" we hear about at the end of our reading today, when Luke writes, "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." At first, there doesn't seem to be much good news here, not with all that talk of vipers and axes and fire. But there it is in John's answer to the crowd's question, to our question: "What then should we do?"

He says that this God, who is about to be born to you in Christ, won't be found in the temple or among the saints. You don't have to be a prophet in the wilderness, or a priest in the sanctuary. You just have to be you. Because that's where God is being born—in your life, right where you are, in the middle of everything that feels chaotic and mundane and totally not spiritual.

God is where you live and work every Monday morning and Thursday afternoon. Every interaction, every job, can be spiritual. A banker can be a messenger of the good news. We are

all ministers: caregivers and nurses and police officers, cashiers and mechanics and plumbers, politicians and lawyers and engineers, teachers and accountants and architects, salespeople and librarians and doctors, parents and people who are retired and people with disabilities and people who volunteer and people who are just trying to make it day to day. Anyone can throw a bit of God's kindness, God's justice, God's integrity into the world.

Jesus, after all, wasn't a priest. He was a carpenter.

We don't need to be heroes. We just need to live like God's here.

As it is written in 1 Peter, "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ" (4:10-11).

What would it look like for God to be praised through your daily life? Your job? Your community? Your dinner table?

John's invitation, this Advent, to you is not to give up your life in the pursuit of the spiritual; it's to rethink your life as spiritual.

There's a story of a mother who went to the DMV to renew her driver's license. When asked her occupation, the mother wasn't sure how to answer. The clerk explained, "What I mean is: Do you have a job, or are you just a...?" "Of course, I have a job," she snapped. "I'm a mother." The clerk replied with disdain, "We don't list 'mother' as occupation... 'housewife' covers it."

The next time the mother went to the DMV, she came prepared. Again, she was asked her occupation. This time, she said, "I'm a Research Associate in the field of Child Development and Human Relations." The clerk paused, ball-point pen frozen in mid-air, and looked up as though she hadn't heard right. The mother repeated the title slowly, as she watched with amazement as the clerk wrote down the title. "Might I ask," said the clerk with new interest, "just what you do in your field?" The mother replied, "I have a continuing program of research in the laboratory and in the field. I often work 14 hours a day (24 is more like it). But the rewards are in satisfaction rather than just money." The clerk looked at her with newfound respect.

That day, the mother returned home, greeted by her lab assistants ages 13, 7, and 3. Upstairs, she could hear her new experimental model (6 months old) in the child-development program, testing out a new vocal pattern. She felt triumphant. She had scored a beat on bureaucracy. And she had gone down on official records as someone more distinguished and indispensable to humanity than "just another..."¹

Just as that mother rebranded, so should we all. We are all proclaimers of the good news of God, that love is afoot. We are all ministers. We are all midwives to the kindness and justice that are being born into the world. Claim it, as that mother did. Your work matters. There is no unspiritual job; there are only people who haven't realized it yet. **Amen.**

¹ This story, and much of its wording, comes from Tony Boonstra.