

What must I do?
A Sermon by Rev. Frances Savill
Sunday December 12, 2021

Luke 3:7-18

I don't know what you came expecting this morning, maybe some word from shepherds or Joseph, maybe something about a star.

Something gentle and quiet – a rest from the hustle and bustle of the world, and instead, we turn to the gospel of Luke and hear the abrasive voice of John the Baptist.

"John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.'"

His message ends with a stern warning,

'His winnowing-fork (speaking about the Messiah) is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

So how does God make us new, how do we become beautiful new creations?

I'd like to show you a short video.

It is not Christmassy or festive, but it does speak to becoming a new creation in Christ.

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGT1rGxfaKw>

"What must ***I*** do" in the words of those who came to John in the wilderness.

And I want to say, what I think is a very important word.

We read "what must I do to be saved?" and we think- a once and done-believe in Jesus.

But I encourage you to hear "what must I do to be "healed"". The word is the same in Greek.

What must I do to be healed?

And the first important note is that judgment is supposed to be good news – not bad.

Jesus came to bring life.

He came to separate wheat from chaff.

He came to set us free from the sin in our lives, the sin that weighs us down and holds us captive.

Jesus loves us with a trustworthy and great love... as the best lover of every human heart, he can be trusted when he comes, to do what is best for us... sifting our hearts, destroying the evil, liberating us to be the people he has made us to be.

The note of importance is that the repentance John calls us to is a total *metanoia*, a complete turning around ***from self to God***.

The gospel, first, calls us back to personal reconciliation with God, but it also connects us with God's reconciling purposes in conscience, culture, church, creation, and cosmos.

God made us to be in partnership with God, and with God's work in the world. We, each one of us, is part of God's plan for the care world and everyone in it.

Because we have rebelled against God, and not partnered with God things are a mess in our world.

God wants to change it all, redeem it all, make all things new.

We may come to the river singing "Just as I Am," but we will not leave these waters without having participated in a painful, costly work that continues throughout our lives – God making us new creations, recreating us and everything that is around us so that we would learn God's ways.

So what do we do to get ready – what is our part in it – if we choose God's salvation, not saving ourselves, how will we respond?

What do we do with God's kingdom breaking in, in our midst?

It's interesting that John, living out in the desert doesn't call the people to solitude and prayer – leaving the world- following monastic or spiritual pursuits.

It seems that everyone can respond just where they are – it's terribly practical-

If you have two coats – give one to someone in need

If you have extra food – give it to someone in need.

If you are a gossip, turn it over to God, learn silence, humility, stop what you are doing.

If you struggle with lust, turn it over to God, find others who will help you be accountable.

You do it in your work...

If you're a soldier – be content with your pay, don't extort money.

If you're a tax collector, collect what is right – no more.

If you struggle with addictions of any kind, turn it over to God, and find in God hope for today, and find support in a 12 step program.

I can imagine John speaking to people today...

If you're a teacher you respond to God's kingdom by being the best teacher you can be, fairest in marking.

If you are an employee, you respond by doing an honest day's work.

If you're in business, treat your employees fairly, do the work that is before you honestly.

If you lead, lead with integrity.

This is basic ethical actions – love God – love your neighbor.

Will Wilimon wrote on this passage in the Christian Century Magazine. He wrote:

"And so, on this third Sunday of Advent, we gather and ask one another, "What must we do to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom?" Unfortunately, we often respond by urging people to sit quietly in lavender churches, reflect upon the state of their souls and feel sad about their peccadilloes (trifling sins). But John will have none of this. He knows that when one is faced with so great and different a kingdom as this, one must repent. One must turn around, through deeds as costly, specific and particular as sharing clothing and food.

Unfortunately, we have psychologized the gospel, turned it into a feeling, transformed the Kingdom of God into a mood. We have deluded ourselves into thinking that the Messiah whom we await is the great cosmic affirmer of everything we hold dear and of all our illusions

The Church must be reformed again and again, (by the Word of God) converted again and again (by the living Word of God- Jesus) in each day in order that it may fulfill its task.

So, this Sunday, in the midst of our growing joy at the advent of God into our world, let us pause to listen to this harsh prophet standing knee-deep in cold Jordan water. Hear his judging words, no matter where they strike and hurt. Remember -- our Lord comes not only to save us but also to change us, to convert these stones into children. This Lord comes as the one who will turn everything upside-down, even us, until all creation is under his rule.

Let us not flee his judgment with sweet platitudes. Let us heed the words of the prophet and bear fruits that befit repentance, giving up our alibis and false hopes and repenting through work that corresponds to God's advent among us."

These are not easy, comfortable words, but they are words of hope for our world, and the Good News of the Gospel, and how God makes beautiful things out of us, day by day.

Thanks be to God!