

Third Sunday in Advent

SURPRISING HOPE

Luke 3:7-18

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By Steven E. Albertin

7John 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? 8Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to 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. 9Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

10And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" 11In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." 12Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 14Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

15As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His winnowing fork 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.”

18So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people

DIAGNOSIS: Surprisingly Hopeless

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Looking for Hope*

As the days shorten and the culture frantically engages in its annual orgy of nostalgic longing for Christmases past, self-indulgent excess and self-serving charity, an underlying anxiety drives it all: looking for hope. Another year has past. What has mattered? There must be something in which we can hope. The church’s season of Advent and its ancient texts acknowledge that widespread cultural ache.

The crowds flock to the crazy baptizer in the wilderness because they too are looking for hope and want to cover their bases. John’s fiery preaching, his call to repentance and his unprecedented demand that all must be baptized touch a sensitive nerve. What if he is right? What if there is a Coming One who is finally going settle the score for everyone?

Some believe they can flee to the nostalgic memories of the past (not all that unlike our current culture’s longing for the warm memories of Christmases past): they have Abraham as their ancestor! They have genes and memories that guarantee their future and their hope. Other’s moral sensitivities are too honest to let such nostalgia cover up the moral demands of the moment and the inequalities of society. If the End is bearing down on them, as John’s fiery preaching implies, “what then should we do?” Not all that unlike the “do good” appeals to the “spirit of Christmas,” there is a sense of urgency that fills

the season. If they only knew what they should do to bring some holiday cheer, then at least there is hope . . . for the world . . . and for them.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Losing Hope*

But John the Baptizer is a prophet. Prophets never do what is expected of them. They are always full of surprises. Their words are always filled with shock and awe. Appealing to political correctness is out of the question. John does not let us down. Can you imagine opening a Christmas card in the Advent days before Christmas and reading these words: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" What ever happened to "Merry Christmas" and "Seasons Greetings"? John punctures one balloon after another revealing that our hopes were only so much hot air.

Nostalgic longings for the memories of the (Christmases) past guarantee nothing. God can raise up children of Abraham from a pile of rocks.

If we think that doing a few good deeds is going to salve our anxiety and give us hope, John pulls out the rug from under us. John demands deeds that expose the self-centeredness that lurks in all of our supposedly good deeds.

Anyone and everyone that needs a coat or something to eat, give it to them, no questions asked! Tax collectors, who were expected to make a living on whatever extra they could extract from their subjects, give it up and forego what puts bread on your family's table. Soldiers, who have no power without the threat of the sword and fear of intimidation, be like the nice guy who lives next door.

Such demands are impossible to keep. That is precisely the point. The prophet is not in the business of telling us what to do so that we could please whoever or whatever is coming to

settle the score. John is not about giving us the recipe to bake a cake of hope. Follow these ten steps and you can be sure that you are safe. John is calling us to repentance: to let go and let God.

We can't. We won't. We don't. Therefore, we are losing hope and can't seem to do anything about it.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *"Hopeless"*

The future we believe in is the future we get. The god we believe in is the god we have. If we are hopeless, then a future without hope is what we get. As the prophets did before him, John piles on and is all too willing to reinforce this dismal diagnosis.

If we act like we have some claim on the future because of our past, our genes, our bloodlines, our social class, our good family, our warm memories of Christmases past, then don't be surprised if God is done with us. God can raise up a future from a pile of rocks. God doesn't need us to do that.

If we live reckless and fruitless lives, doing whatever we please, ("God loves to forgive sins! I love to commit them! Isn't the world admirably arranged!"), then don't be surprised when God decides to get out His axe and do away with such worthless and unproductive vegetation.

All the destruction, suffering and hurt that fill the news and sear our memories are exactly what they appear to be: the settling of the score has begun. The "winnowing fork 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."

Since we are faithless and hopeless, God isn't going to let us down.

PROGNOSIS: Surprisingly Hopeful!

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Hopeful*

All of this seems so logical and so expected. What else would you anticipate from a prophet who was called by God to tell the truth regardless of the whims of public opinion? That is why Luke's closing comment is such a surprise: "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed GOOD NEWS to the people." There is good news here? Where?

John speaks of a "coming" one who is "more powerful than I." This One too will baptize, but it will be more than a call to repentance. It will be more than a rejection of our nostalgic clinging to the past and our self-serving attempts at good works. It will be "with the Holy Spirit and with fire." It will not just be the burning of chaff but also the "gather(ing) of wheat into his granary." In other words, this Coming One is ultimately about saving!

This One is more powerful than John. This One will be able to complete what John has only begun. This One is the only One who can answer the anxiety and satisfy the restless longing for hope that lurks in every one of us. This is the One to which this Advent Season and John the Baptist point: Jesus.

This One's birth in human flesh in the most human of circumstances (one week and counting) points ahead to His baptism by this same John. There Jesus once again identifies publicly with our hopeless plight. When Jesus, over the protests of John, requests a baptism that was only supposed to be for sinners, He joined us and all the hopeless sinners of this world and became one with us. Being "a friend of sinners" became the driving center of His whole life. Therefore when the time came, He put himself with us also under the blade of the axe and into the flames of the unquenchable fire. He suffered the fate that threatens to verify our hopelessness once and for all. When He

chose not to flee the fire and elude the axe, when He did not come down from the cross, he seemed to confirm our hopeless plight. Scrooge really was right about life and Christmas and any such sentimental notions: “Bah! Humbug!”

But SURPRISE! When God raised Him from the dead, Jesus had the last word. The ancient Christmas carol is no wishful thinking or idle tale after all: “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

Of course, when Luke reported this about John, he had the advantage of telling it from the other side of Easter. No wonder he declares in hindsight that this was good news to the people

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Hoping*

We stand in the same place. We too have the advantage of hindsight. Jesus has come to save us, “to gather the wheat into his granary.” We “get to” believe this. We “get to” trust this good news. It is indeed intended for us so that we might do what was previously impossible: repent and believe.

Repenting means that we can leave behind the false hope of genes, family, and revisionist memories of Christmases past that never really were. Abraham never was, and need not be, our ancestor. We have all the family connections we need in Jesus.

Repenting means that we don’t need to neurotically and chronically worry, “What then should we do?” assuming if we could only know the answer to this question (let alone “do it”), we would have hope.

Believing means that because of this One, we have all the hope we need. We are hoping in a future that is now in the hands of the One who went this way before us and has the future in His hands. The axe has been blunted. The fire has been quenched. The harvest has been completed . . . and we are safe and sound in

the granary. By faith, through believing, it is true, an accomplished fact. The anxiety is now relieved. The ache is now gone. The hope is realized.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Having Hope*

Having hope in our hearts and lives, life can no longer remain the same. It is no longer business as usual. We no longer have to anxiously ask, "What then should we do?" We no longer have to ask or question who might be the messiah and the one who can solve our problems and answer our fears. We no longer have to fear the future, the blade of the axe or the flames of fire. We no longer have to live hopelessly or cynically resenting the charitable opportunities of this holiday season or any season with a grumpy "Bah! Humbug!"

Instead, having hope we "get to" share our coats with the poor, give food to the hungry, selflessly serve our neighbor and fearlessly care for the world without having to brandish a sword or wave a gun. We no longer need to extort, exploit, threaten or bribe our way through this life. Having hope we no longer need to ever fear the future.

It is told that when Luther was once asked what he would do if he knew the world was to end tomorrow, he said, "Plant a tree." Having hope he didn't anxiously wonder "What should we then do?" as if he was not ready and had to get prepared or else. On the contrary, having hope he kept on doing what he always had done: repent and believe; trust God and keep on caring for the world.