

Third Sunday in Advent

A MATTER OF MOOD

Luke 3:7-18

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

John said to the crowds that came 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 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 with 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: Living in the Subjunctive Mood

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Doing in the Dark*

Warning! When is “good news” (v. 18) not THE “good news”? When the question, “What should we do?” (vv. 10, 12, 14) is based on “bearing fruits worthy of repentance” (v. 8) rather than on faith in Christ (v. 16). John, like all sinners before and after him, could only answer the question based on the Law: on our doing and being held accountable for our doing. Externally, this smaller problem is evident in everything that we do, but especially the relative “good” that we do. If the subjunctive “should” in our question presumes our own ability to fulfill the Law, we will never hit the mark. Our sin thus becomes more and more evident.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Believing in the Dark*

Warning! When is “good news” (v. 18) not THE “good news”? When the question, “What should we do?” (vv. 10, 12, 14) is based on saying to ourselves, “‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’” (v. 8) rather than on faith in Christ (v. 16). John, like all sinners before and after him, could only answer the question based on the Law: on our un-faith and being held accountable for our un-faith. Internally, this larger problem is evident in our supposed inclusion by heritage, presuming that God’s promise to Abraham (hence Abraham’s faith, Jesus’ faith, Luke’s faith, our pastor’s faith) need not be internalized in each of us as well. If the subjunctive “should” in our question presumes that we have somehow fulfilled the Law, then we have already missed the mark. Our sin thus compounds itself endlessly.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Facing God in the Dark*

Warning! When is “good news” (v. 18) not THE “good news”? When the question, “What should we do?” (vv. 10, 12, 14) is based on “the wrath to come” (v. 7; specifically “the ax” and the “fire” v. 8) rather than on faith in Christ (v. 16). John, like all sinners before and after him, could only answer the question based on the Law: on God’s total opposition to sinners and we being held accountable for being sinners. Eternally, this greatest Problem we face is GOD himself, whose wrath against us burns with “unquenchable fire” (v. 17). The subjunctive “should” in our question hints at our insufficiency. If we can presume, wrongly, that we do good (enough) or that we believe (enough), nonetheless we cannot escape the GOD who is absolutely beyond our control, beyond all our doing, willing, and understanding. Our sin, belonging inescapably to us alone, awaits God’s final judgment upon us: death.

PROGNOSIS: Living in the Declarative Mood

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Facing God in the Light*

Rejoice! The “good news” is THE “good news” when the question, “What should we do?” (Acts 2:37) is based on the actualized promise of Christ. For John, as also for Abraham, the “good news” (or “gospel” v. 18) could only be prospective, second-best, because he could not possibly anticipate that God’s Messiah was to be crucified and raised from the dead. John’s “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (3:3) was still in the dark. But with the fulfillment of the Promise in Christ in the cross (24:44-49; Acts 2:17-36), both repentance and forgiveness are fully realized as unmerited acts of God. What was promised can now be declared as fulfilled; and living in the subjunctive mood has been rendered “null and void.”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Believing in*

the Light

No longer do we need to “question in our hearts” (v. 15) whether God’s Messiah has come. And so we may declare: In Jesus Christ—and we in him, God has fulfilled the Law and the Promise. Trusting in God’s Messiah (“cut to the heart” Acts 2:37), nothing further needs to be done to secure God’s praise. Subjunctive stones that we were, in Christ we have been raised up as children of Abraham (v. 8). God’s christic declaration side-steps the subjunctive mood altogether, placing our whole lives in God’s hands and in a future of God’s own creating.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Doing in the Light*

On this declarative basis, the follow-up question “What should we do?” can only mean: “What should we do, now that Christ on our behalf has fulfilled both the Law and the Promise in his dying and rising (and therefore we don’t have to do anything to avoid the wrath to come)?” Luke’s answer, in Acts 2:38-47, is God centered and neighbor directed. What we do is no longer for ourselves but for others. No longer confined to the dark, no longer fearing the final judgment of God, we may risk loving others solely for their sake. Although love takes us back into the dark, we do so with eyes and hearts wide open.