

”WHAT THEN SHALL WE DO?”
LUKE 3: 7-18

December 13, 2009 – The Third Sunday of Advent
University Church of Chicago
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When I answered the telephone one day last week, a young woman on the other line identified herself by name and title—she is an obituary writer for the Chicago Tribune—and proceeded to tell me, “I’m writing an obituary for Dr. Eugene Winkler.” When I responded with some amazement—not knowing that I was already dead and like Mark Twain reminding her that “the reports of my demise have been greatly exaggerated,” she corrected herself to tell me that she wanted my help in writing an obituary for a friend of mine.

Nevertheless, it was a startling moment, and one that makes you think. Let me ask you: what do you think they will write about you in your obituary? Or, to put it another way, what do you hope they will say about you? I’m not talking about accomplishments, lists of honors, degrees or corporations served. What characteristics do we want the obituary writer to highlight? Between the lines, as it were.

What do you want said about you at your funeral? For what do you want to be remembered? What lies will need to be told in order to make us appear more loving, honest, generous and compassionate than we really have been?

On the Third Sunday of Advent, Luke gives us a sample of the preaching of John the Baptist. We have to put up with this difficult wilderness wanderer on the second and third Sundays of the season every year, and he challenges people like you and me, people who tend to rest on our spiritual and intellectual laurel, nice Christian folks who do not often consider God’s judgment. Over all these years in the church we have, as Soren Kierkegaard repeatedly reminds us, become a part of Christendom at the cost of true Christianity.

John denounces his hearers as a “brood of vipers,” and he sarcastically asks, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” God’s wrath is coming, so John seeks to discern whether people will heed his warning. He follows his question with a practical exhortation to “bear fruit. That is, God expects more from us than mere belief. God expects us to behave, to live according to what we know to be right and faithful.

There is no getting to Bethlehem and the sweet baby in the manger without first hearing the prophet in the wilderness calling us to repentance. Faithful and fruitful arrival at the manger will be possible only after the careful self-examination and recommitment called for by John.

Well, friends, it’s easier to stand on a rock beside the Jordan River or on the corner of State and Washington in Chicago and exhort the passersby than it is to call comfortable, assembled, pre-Christmas worshipers to reprioritize their lives which are to be focused on the love of god and the love and care of neighbor. In the Southern Methodist denomination in which I grew up, we had church members who played the John the Baptist role in worship. They were licensed

“exhorters,” church members who after due examination by the district superintendent would sit on the first row of the church near the pulpit. After the sermon, the preacher would sit down and the exhorter would not only sum up the sermon but vociferously call for the people to repent, to act out what they already know and affirm, out of the deepest values of the tradition and people that they claim and that the exhorter claims with them.

Luke describes John the Baptist's rhetorical method as exhortation (*parakalon* in Greek, verse 18) His preaching was a mix of irony, hyperbole, criticism, warning, self-effacement, direction and anticipation. More than finger-pointing or accusing, this preaching method summons us to integrity of action, memory and identity.

God is upholding, justifying, exonerating and confirming those whom God loves. People like my friend whose obituary the young Tribune writer was working on.
the saints.

Notice to whom John's sermon is directed: “the crowds,” “tax collectors,” and “soldiers.” And each group asks John what they must do. And each group receives a practical answer: care for the needy and practice truth and justice. He commands each group slightly differently, according to their roles and possessions. He admonishes the crowds—people like you and me—to share their wealth and care for the less fortunate. He commands the tax collectors to be fair and honest in their work in a field known for its corruption and greed. The soldiers, a surprising group of listeners, are warned about the greed that their position enabled them to act upon.

Some of you are sitting there this morning, saying to yourselves, “Well, I know the preacher is trying to lambast me because he thinks I'm like those people to whom John is preaching—self-righteous and arrogant and one who gives clergy a hard time—but I tithe, I go to all those dull meetings, I do the work of the church, I serve on committees, I help pay his salary so that he can continue to preach as if he were a twenty-first century version of John the Baptist.”

In a sense, in a real sense, you're right. These people who hear John are not venomous villains. And the answer is not simply doing good. If each of them gets what he or she deserves, then there is no grace in John's preaching.

Years ago, Halford Luccock wrote of a doorman of a New York theater who had guarded the stage door for 17 years but had never once entered the theater to see a performance. “Is it possible,” Luccock asked, “for a preacher and members of a congregation to become that sort of doorkeeper in the house of the Lord?” We can put our attention on the peripheral, the incidental, the mechanical and be lost to the central living drama of salvation at the heart of the Gospel.

Herb Miller tells of a nightclub opening on Main Street in a small town in the Midwest, so the only church in town organized an all-night prayer meeting. The church members asked God to burn down the nightclub.

Guess what! Within a few minutes, lightning struck the club and it burned to the ground. The owner sued the church, which denied responsibility. “We were just praying,” said its members.

“After hearing both sides, the judge said, ‘It seems that wherever the guilt may be, the tavern keeper is the one who really believes in prayer, while the church doesn’t.’”

We know the hypocrisy of saying one thing and doing another, believing with our lips but not with our hearts. Those people in that small town are all too familiar in the annals of Christianity, because they represent the crowds of supposedly good, seeking people who come to hear John the Baptist.

When we pray, we all come to those devastating times when prayer is consistent and continual but our petitions are hurled against long periods of silence. God delays, God doesn’t answer, God’s ways are mysterious. “All we know in the life of prayer,” says Fred Craddock, “is asking, seeking, knocking, and waiting, trust sometimes fainting, sometimes growing angry. Persons of such a prayer life can only wonder at those who speak of prayer with the smiling facility of someone drawing answers from a hat. . . . An elderly black minister gave a one-sentence interpretation: ‘Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is.’”

Our family has vacationed for several years on Holden Beach, North Carolina, a barrier island situated on the border between North Carolina and South Carolina. I characterize the island as five miles long and a hundred yards wide. It’s a quiet little place with only one small grocery store and no restaurants on an island of middle-class homes rented by middle-class folks like us every summer. Our kids and grandkids have loved the narrow little beach that stretched along the Atlantic Ocean.

About five miles up by water and about twenty-five miles through winding, back-country roads is another island, Bald Head Island. The contrast with our little domicile is remarkable. Bald Head can only be reached by ferry, no automobiles are allowed, and the beaches are at least 100 yards wide and sparkle with freshly-raked white sand. The homes are nestled among giant trees and each begins at a million dollars in value. Driving a golf-cart around Bald Head is like being on a Southern Homes tour. Marilyn and our grandson, Brandon, and I went over to Bald Head several years ago and we were suitably impressed.

The developers of Bald Head have built a beautiful little completely-glass chapel for the residents to worship in during the summer. They invite visiting preachers to come and tell the Good News each week. I have lusted after the experience for since I learned about it. I would love to preach there.

But a friend of mine who preached there last summer said, “Don’t go there.” “Why?” I asked. “Those folks,” he said, “think they’re already in heaven. They don’t need a preacher. They live in those big homes in that bucolic place with every amenity and all their rich friends. They don’t go to that chapel to hear the Word of God. They go to look out at the ocean.”

Luke uses a reversal motif in this story of John’s preaching and the people questioning him, and without any question his answers were a shock to his first-century listeners. If anyone within the community of Judaism would be despised it would be a tax collector. Working for the Roman occupiers, an oppressive foreign power, collecting taxes from his own people as a participant in a

cruel and corrupt system, politically a traitor, religiously unclean, this publican was a reprehensible character. And occupying soldiers who forced you to carry their heavy packs and walk the law-designated mile—how and why did they come to hear the Baptizer?

All stand in need of God's grace and each receives it—each in his own way.

One of the greatest moments of my college life was when Louis Armstrong and his All-Stars came to the University of Arkansas. As chair of the Student Entertainment Committee of the University Senate in those antediluvian days, I had urged, cajoled, threatened to stop bringing big bands for dances in the Student Union which very few attended. So, one of my first acts was to book Pops and his band along with the inimitable Velma Middleton as the vocalist. It was the first time since Reconstruction that a black man had appeared in concert at the University.

I had two duties associated with that legendary concert: first, to book the band into the Arkansas Hotel in Fayetteville and to take them to dinner after the concert. You can imagine the difficulties of that assignment, but we had a wonderful evening as Pops told stories and entertained us—the band and I—with his humor and humility. I still have a packet of laxative he gave me, a gift he made to countless people all over the world because he believed in its ameliorative effects. The second duty was to lay out on the stage in the fieldhouse a pile of those huge white handkerchiefs, dozens of which he would go through during a concert as he wiped his brow constantly—and then to introduce the band.

Louis came to Chicago in 1922 to play with his idol and mentor, the Louisiana-born trumpeter Joe (King) Oliver. The records they cut at Okeh Studios are the first in which we hear Pops play his cornet. By the time I knew him, he had blown out three lips by playing as many as three hundred gigs a year and hitting high C dozens of times a night—and sometimes even a high F—while still spinning out solos of genius with a personality to match.

Accused by some people of being an Uncle Tom, Louis Armstrong's anger about the injustices of segregation was palpable and he spoke out against Orval Faubus and President Eisenhower during the Little Rock crisis. Once he spoke out, people like Jackie Robinson and Eartha Kitt followed. He turned down a 1969 invitation to play at the White House because he knew that Nixon wanted only to placate black rage. "The only reason they want me there now," he said, "is to make some niggers happy."

Living by grace and anchored in his own deep spirituality, Louis Armstrong refused to let anything steal the joy from his life. He really did believe that "It's a Wonderful World," and he lived and played that way.

Whose message is strong enough to lead us to the repentance to which we are called? Not the church's, for it is too much a snake pit of compromise and bourgeois conformity. Not our own insight and goodness, for we are as needy as anyone in the crowd—hoarding coats and food away from the hungry and homeless. We are like the tax collectors who listen to John—dependent upon unjust structures of corruption which we ignore or calmly accept, saying, "Oh, that's the way it's always been in Chicago and Illinois." And we are like the occupying army—caught in a culture of exploitation and violence.

Kierkegaard characterized the true Christian as “invisible,” as an ordinary person you would meet on the street. But the outer appearance has nothing to do with the inner seeker, the one whose relationship with God is not based on objectivity but subjectivity, complete surrender to the One whose grace suffuses the ordinary.

Ultimately Luke summarizes John’s message as good news (*evangelizo*) and thereby includes it within the good news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Before you and I can receive the spirit, before we can understand that Christ is Messiah, we must repent of our self-sufficiency.

Whenever I characterize a poet as “my favorite,” a number of you smile, because you know that whatever poet I am currently reading, that one is my favorite. But among them all R. S. Thomas stands as one of the tallest. He was an Anglican clergyman who served in Wales for many years (there are not many Church of England types in Wales—that’s Presbyterian/Calvinist territory) and died last year at the age of eighty-nine.

In *Later Poems, 1972-1982*, Thomas writes a word about God’s calling:

Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future,
nor hankering after
an imagined past.
It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.