

THE GOOD NEWS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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“He proclaimed the good news to the people.”ⁱ How can we speak of good news today, after 27 children and teachers were massacred Friday in Connecticut? We gather here in grief, in despondency, in anger, in desolation. It’s good, though, that we gather, because it’s in community that we support each other, remind each other of eternal values, and share our burdens together. In church we also pray and sing, speak and listen, remember and envision. This is Advent, and we await the birth of a baby who symbolizes light in the darkness and hope amid despair. So, we’ve read our lessons from the lectionary for the day, and I’ll preach a sermon based on them. From Isaiah, “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust.”ⁱⁱ From Luke, “He proclaimed the good news to the people.” And then we’ll sing of the “One who comes to set us free, O Child, to you our song will be.”ⁱⁱⁱ We will pray. We will pass the peace to each other – the peace which passes all understanding, which the world can neither give nor take away, but which is always among us and abides in our hearts forever. And we’ll sing some more before a final benediction. It’s good that we’re together here.

The scriptures today proclaim three lessons, I believe: “Stay close to the poor. Be accountable to your community. Avoid ego trips.” I’m paraphrasing what Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement in the early twentieth century, once told a young man who was struggling with a major life decision.^{iv} I think these three ideas constitute the good news of John the Baptist too. I’ll be coming back to them throughout this sermon. “Stay close to the poor. Be accountable to your community. Avoid ego trips.”

Today's New Testament lectionary reading^v has John the Baptist calling the people who piously come to him to be immersed in the River Jordan a "brood of vipers". Not so nice. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."^{vi} Yow. What kinds of fruits are those? "Every tree...that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Ouch. So the crowds who have come to be baptized by the great Baptizer ask him, "What then should we do?" Parenthetically, I think they're saying, 'Isn't your baptism enough?' And John replies, "Stay close to the poor." Actually, he says, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."^{vii} Then, he exclaims, "Be accountable to your community." Actually, he tells the tax collectors who are coming to be baptized, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." That is, you're part of a community from which taxes are collected on behalf of the government, but nothing of what you collect should be skimming for yourself. Finally, he responds to soldiers who ask him, "And we, what should we do?" with the equivalent of, "Avoid ego trips." For these are the big bullies who go around exercising the power of the Roman Empire to oppress the local population of Jews. So, John says to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats...and be satisfied with your wages."

What's this lectionary reading doing in the Advent season leading up to Christmas, paired with a reading from Isaiah^{viii} in the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible? Isaiah proclaims, "I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might... With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." The great prophet born more than 700 years before John the Baptist^{ix} is connecting his constant demand for human justice and righteousness to God's subsequent reward of water from the greatest of all wells, that of salvation.^x Behind both of these readings is the heralding of a Messiah to come. In the prior chapter, Isaiah speaks of a

shoot coming out from the stump of Jesse, the father of King David. “The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,” and “he shall...decide with equity for the meek of the earth.” In those times to come, “The wolf shall live with the lamb...the calf and the lion...together, and a little child shall lead them.”^{xi} John the Baptist seven centuries later is reported by Luke to proclaim that, “One who is more powerful than I is coming.”^{xii} He’s the one who will clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his granary.^{xiii} Of course for Christians the Messiah to come is Jesus of Nazareth.

But let’s stay with John the Baptist today. Jesus will have his day next week in the great mass for Christ or “Christmas.” Today we learn that John the Baptist, with the exhortations we’ve examined and many others, “proclaimed the good news to the people.” We know something of the good news, or the gospel, of Jesus. But what exactly is the good news of John the Baptist? Who was this man in his own right, what was he trying to do, who did he collect around him, and what was the nature of his good news?

The Roman historian, Flavius Josephus, writing about 60 years after the death of Jesus, described John the Baptist as follows: “John who was called Baptist...was a good man and one who commanded the Jews to practice virtue and act with justice toward one another and with piety toward God....And when others gathered together [around John] (for they were also excited to the utmost by listening to [his] teachings), [King] Herod, because he feared that his great persuasiveness with the people might lead to some kind of strife...thought it more preferable, before anything radically innovative happened as a result of him, to execute [John]....”^{xiv}

So, John the Baptist was well enough known in his times to be written about outside of the Bible. According to biblical scholar Walter Wink, who preached in this pulpit in 2005 and

just died this year, there was a Jewish phenomenon known as a baptizing movement at the River Jordan for about 150 years before John the Baptist and for 150 years after his death. Baptism was in lieu of temple sacrifice, which lay at the heart of Judaism until the final destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. These Jewish baptizing sects were fiercely independent from each other but were part of a broad movement against contemporary piety, open to new claims of revelation.

John was made a hero by a number of branches of the baptizing movement – Christians and Mandaeans and certain Gnostic groups amongst them. A variety of sects could lay claim to him without having to join cause with his surviving disciples. But the Christian Church ended up standing at the very center of John’s movement from the beginning, and “became its one truly great survivor and heir.” The whole idea of “good news” or “gospel” began with John. Jesus said a number of things in veneration of John and his message,^{xv} and likely was one of his disciples before beginning his own ministry. Jewish authorities complained that John was opening up the kingdom of God to the “lawless, immoral rabble.” But he sensed an eschatological crisis at hand: The kingdom of God was present, beginning to break into the world, but was in conflict with many current ways of life. Jesus then, in turn, followed him to talk of the kingdom of God as being first for the poor and the dispossessed and about the idea of the kingdom of God already being present in the world, although only in seedling form. The early church subsequently came to protect John’s image as foundational to that of Jesus. This required establishing unique ownership of John in relation to the larger baptizing movement, including John’s own disciples who never converted to Christianity. The role prescribed for John by Christians was as the one who prepared the way for Jesus by proclaiming the good news of the emergent kingdom of God in the world^{xvi} – one which had a preferential option for the

poor, which had a strong sense of unique community, and which didn't allow individual ego to prevail over concern for others. It's those three instructions again, "Stay close to the poor. Be accountable to your community. Avoid ego trips."

Many biblical scholars have described John as being deeply concerned about the deliverance of the common people of his day from the political and economic oppression they were experiencing both at the hands of the Jewish aristocracy and also the Roman occupying forces in the Jewish homeland. Some Jews supported Roman domination and profited thereby, like wealthy landowners. There were also at the time requirements like the tithe to support the temple in Jerusalem, the tribute owed to Rome, and special levies of Roman taxes, which all together crushed the average person. John the Baptist's good news, therefore, was very good news for the common people – pointing to the possibility of deliverance and raising hopes and expectations. On the other hand, it was a profound threat to those who supported the *status quo*. The Roman historian Josephus wrote that on the one hand common people were "excited to the utmost by listening to [his] teachings," but on the other hand King Herod became so afraid of John's persuasive power to raise strife against him and the upper classes that he had John killed.^{xvii}

So, how does the good news of the John the Baptist look in our own times in America? Starting with the Reagan administration in the 1980's, huge cuts have been made in social safety net programs like welfare, Medicaid, and food stamps. Income disparity, which fell in the decades after Roosevelt's New Deal, has been increasing since 1977. The richest one percent of households now holds more than a third of the nation's wealth.^{xviii} Three months ago, the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, a division of the Library of Congress, issued a report on the radical decrease in the top income tax rate, which had been above ninety percent in

the 1950's and is now at thirty-five percent: "Changes over the past 65 years in the marginal top tax rate and the top capital gains rate do not appear correlated with economic growth," but instead merely "appear to be associated with the increasing concentration of income at the top of the income distribution."^{xxix} Stay close to the poor, John proclaimed. Be accountable to your community. Avoid ego trips. We're not doing that.

This isn't the current partisan issue it seems to be either. During President Obama's first term, the Dow Jones average nearly doubled. Corporations saw their profits grow an average of 78% per year.^{xx} What's been called "corporate welfare" continued to expand, as it has over a number of decades, with tens of billions of dollars of governmental subsidies, tax breaks, import quotas, and beneficial regulations for American businesses.^{xxi} But if one visits the F.D.R. Memorial in Washington, these words are etched in stone on it, from Roosevelt's Second Inaugural Address: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide for those who have too little."^{xxii}

Jim Wallis, editor of the evangelical Christian *Sojourners* magazine and our Baccalaureate speaker here at Stanford in 2004, has pointed out that at both the Democratic and Republican conventions last summer, the phrase "middle class" was constantly repeated, but virtually nothing was said about the poor. Christians' first principle for politics must be what happens to the poor and vulnerable.^{xxiii} As Jesus is cited as saying in Matthew 25: "What you have done to the least of these, you have done to me."^{xxiv}

Jim Wallis has also pointed to Americans' lack of community accountability and to the risks of personal ego-tripping. He wrote last month in *Sojourners* that, "Individual freedom and well-being is an important American value, but so is community – the recognition that we are all bound together and responsible for one another.... What most needs to be recovered is that

commitment to the common good, what Jesus called loving your neighbor as yourself. We are indeed our brother's and sister's keeper."^{xxv}

So, in this Advent season, let's take to heart the good news of John the Baptist: "Stay close to the poor. Be accountable to your community. Avoid ego trips." Let's try to hear still what the Baptist was shouting so loudly on Jordan's shore two thousand years ago:

"Awake...Behold the voice of prophecy...Clean up your hearts...[F]or without love we fade like grass."^{xxvi}

BENEDICTION

May the Love which overcomes all differences,
Which heals all wounds, which puts to flight all fears,
Which reconciles all who are separated,
Be in us and among us, now and always. AMEN.

NOTES

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- ⁱ Luke 3:18.
- ⁱⁱ Isaiah 12:2.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Coffin, “The Baptist Shouts on Jordan’s Shore” (1736), translation of *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1993).
- ^{iv} Matthew S. Vogel, “Igniting a Revolution of the Heart,” *Reflections* (Yale Divinity School), Fall 2012, P. 68.
- ^v Luke 3: 7-18.
- ^{vi} Luke 3:7-8.
- ^{vii} Luke 3:13.
- ^{viii} Isaiah 12:2-6.
- ^{ix} *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), Vol. VI, p. 36.
- ^x *Ibid.*, p. 148.
- ^{xi} Isaiah 11: 1-2,4,6.
- ^{xii} Luke 3:16.
- ^{xiii} Luke 3:17.
- ^{xiv} Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, as cited in Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), p. 32.
- ^{xv} See, for example, Matthew 11:7-19; Luke 7:18-35.
- ^{xvi} Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 108-114.
- ^{xvii} Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study* Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), pp. 355-357.
- ^{xviii} Jill Lapore, “Tax Time”, *New Yorker* (November 26, 2012), pp. 28-29.
- ^{xix} As cited in *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ^{xx} David Futrell, *Time.com*, as cited in *The Week* (November 23, 2012), p. 35.
- ^{xxi} James Surowiecki, *New Yorker*, as cited in *The Week* (October 19, 2012), p. 38.
- ^{xxii} As cited by the editors in “The Choice,” *The New Yorker* (October 29 and November 5, 2012), p. 38.
- ^{xxiii} Jim Wallis, “How to Choose a President,” *Sojourners* (November, 2012), p. 15.
- ^{xxiv} Matthew 25:40.
- ^{xxv} Wallis, “How to Choose a President,” p. 18.
- ^{xxvi} Coffin, “The Baptist Shouts on Jordan’s Shore.”