

A cartoon shows a skeptic shouting up to the heavens, "God, if you're up there, tells us what we should do!" Back comes a voice, "Feed the hungry, house the homeless, establish justice." The skeptic looks alarmed. "Just testing," he says. "Me too," replies the voice.

The past two Sundays we've heard Luke's description of the preaching of John the Baptist. And pretty much like in the other Gospel accounts, John comes across in the style of a fire-and-brimstone prophet, announcing eschatological judgment, the doom of the End Times, and calling for repentance. He doesn't spend any extra time getting to his sobering message beginning with the less-than-endearing sermon-opener, "You brood of vipers..." and ending with the seemingly ominous "...and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." And Luke doesn't end it there; he finishes out the scene by saying, "So, with many other exhortations, he [John] proclaimed the good news to the people."

Huh?! Excuse me, but, how is this good news?

When we set *Luke's* version of the Gospel alongside that of *Matthew's*, we get a couple of clues that help us understand. First, *Matthew* describes John's listeners as the Pharisees and the Sadducees — maybe as a way to contrast John's ministry with theirs. *Luke* describes those gathering around to hear John simply as "the crowds." Reading further in *Luke*, one begins to realize that "crowds" is a euphemism. He might just as well called them "misfits" or "outcasts" or even "losers." As *Luke* uses the term these folk are

those whose neighborhoods "decent people" try to avoid. The crowds here are made up of, among others, tax collectors (persons who make their profit by squeezing their neighbors on behalf of occupying Rome) and soldiers (not to be confused with our men and women in uniform, rather these are mercenaries and conscripts, thugs who earn most of their wags by extortion and threat). And, the rest are folk who have been manipulating their circumstances to fleece and con good people.

As is often the case in his Gospel, *Luke* turns his attention to those on the margins, those on the outside of “good” society. Some New Testament scholars such as John Carroll and Luke Timothy Johnson say that the *Gospel according to Luke* is for and about “the lost, the least, and the last.” Just as *Luke* reports that it was the tax collectors and sinners (another euphemism for those on the margins who loved to hear Jesus’ stories, here already society’s outcasts and ne’er-do-wells are attracted to Jesus’ forerunner.

“Why?” we might ask.

Perhaps because John was willing to talk with them. You see, despite our best claims, many of us, at times, come across as put off by those who don’t dress as we do, or act like us, or even have the same personal hygiene as us. Even back in John’s day, folks who were down and out rarely felt welcomed at houses of prayer. Yet, John honors them by noticing them, speaking to them, and giving them something to do.

Which brings us to the second clue. Like I said earlier, John doesn’t beat around the bush; nor does *Luke*. Someone might grumble that John doesn’t say anything to the people who didn’t have two cloaks or too much food, but that wasn’t the point. Hearing of the impending judgment, the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers all ask, “what should we do?” And John tells them. Note, his instructions are neither complex nor spiritual. To the poor crowds: share even what you have. To the tax collectors: take only what is fair. To the mercenaries: don’t extort. Reduced to everyday language, these are the rules of the playground: share, be fair, don’t bully.

Simple, clear commands; but if they were obeyed they would demonstrate that people meant business. None of these things happens by chance; they occur when people have genuinely repented of the small-scale injustices which turn society sour and cynical. John gives the crowds a role in the coming kingdom; a role that they can play. He invites them to participate in God’s coming kingdom wherever they are and whatever they may be doing. What John offers them, that is, is entirely within their reach. It may not be easy – we get accustomed to getting what we want and hoarding what we have – but it is still possible.

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Nor does John ask them to leave their current stations. The day after hearing John preach, presumably, the tax collectors are still collecting, the mercenaries still soldiering and the poor were still begging. But they are doing it better, doing it differently, doing it with the needs of their neighbors before them. All that's needed is just enough faith in God at work in and through the ordinary and mundane elements of our lives.

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And here is a promise that we are all invited into. Wherever we may be and whatever we may be doing. In business? Conduct it fairly and with the community in mind. At home with children? Raise them to love God by loving their neighbors. Teaching? Do so with patience and hope. Looking for work? Don't underestimate the good you can do others even without a job. Studying at school? Learn everything you can and put it to work to make this world a better place. Caring for others who are particularly challenging? Remember that of such is the kingdom of heaven made (and give yourself a break when it's hard to remember). And the list goes on.

Yes, we, too, are invited into God's promise for those living "in the meantime." We, too, are caught between judgment and hope every day of our lives, even when we don't name it that way. The judgment may not feel eschatological; it just may be not living up to others' or our own expectations. And the hope may not always be messianic; it just may be the deep desire that things will get better. But wherever we are, John has a message for those living in the meantime, those struggling to be faithful in the time between the giving of the promise and its being kept once and for all.

So, what stories of faithfulness have you witnessed, in your own life, or in the lives of others? When have you acted according to the rules of the playground? Who do you know who shares, is fair in their dealings with others, and doesn't bully? Are you one who lives his or her faith quietly? If so, know that your life itself is a witness, and as such opens the door to

invite others by John – and by the One John heralds – to lives of quiet and persistent faithfulness as we await the coming of the Lord. Because maybe, just maybe, thirteen days shy of Christmas is the perfect time to be reminded that faith doesn't have to be heroic, that our celebrations don't have to be ideal, and that we don't have to be perfect in order to be faithful.

Let us pray: Mighty and ever-loving God, through Your Son and his herald, John, You invite us to live in Your kingdom which has come, is present, and is to come. John gave us clear commands on how to live; commands that Your Son, our Lord Jesus, reinforced through His own teachings and His very own life. By the power of the Holy Spirit, help us to repent of our self-centeredness, of our parochialism, of our reluctance to live out our faith, our certain trust in Your mercy, hope, and love. Let this season of Advent be for us a time of preparation and a time of change to be bold witnesses to all that You have done for the world in, through, and as Jesus the Christ, the One who comes in Your holy name. Amen.