**The Season of Advent**

**Sunday December 16, 2018**

**Advent #3: “A Voice in the Wilderness” (Luke 3:7-18)**

**1. Introduction: *A Christmas Carol***

Each Christmas I make a wish list of Christmas movies that I plan to watch over the holidays, but oftentimes all the Christmas preparations, like shopping, decorating, baking and house cleaning, put a damper on my plans for a Christmas film festival. One of the movies that definitely makes my list is *Scrooge* or *A Christmas Carol* (1951) starring Alistair Sim in the title role. While this is just one of many adaptations of Charles Dickens’ classic story*,* in my opinion, it’s the best. The appeal of both the book and its film adaptations is its message of *redemption*. Ebenezer Scrooge, “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner” is transformed into a kind, compassionate and generous person after being visited by four supernatural beings on Christmas Eve.

 When we first meet Scrooge we get a clear impression of his cold-hearted nature as he receives a visit from two gentlemen seeking charity on Christmas Eve day. Listen to their exchange from the book:

“At this festive season of the year, Mr. Scrooge,' said the gentleman, taking up a pen, “it is more than usually desirable that we should make some slight provision for the Poor and Destitute, who suffer greatly at the present time. Many thousands are in want of common necessaries; hundreds of thousands are in want of common comforts, sir.”

“Are there no prisons?” asked Scrooge.

“Plenty of prisons,” said the gentleman, laying down the pen again.

“And the Union workhouses?” demanded Scrooge. “Are they still in operation?”

“They are. Still,” returned the gentleman, “I wish I could say they were not.”

“The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?” said Scrooge.

“Both very busy, sir.”

“Oh! I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course,” said Scrooge. “I'm very glad to hear it.”

“Under the impression that they scarcely furnish Christian cheer of mind or body to the multitude,” returned the gentleman, “a few of us are endeavouring to raise a fund to buy the Poor some meat and drink, and means of warmth. We choose this time, because it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt, and Abundance rejoices. What shall I put you down for?”

“Nothing!” Scrooge replied.

“You wish to be anonymous?”

“I wish to be left alone,” said Scrooge. “Since you ask me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer. I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned -- they cost enough; and those who are badly off must go there.”

“Many can't go there; and many would rather die.”

“If they would rather die,” said Scrooge, “they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population. Besides -- excuse me -- I don’t know that.”

“But you might know it,” observed the gentleman.

“It's not my business,” Scrooge returned. “It's enough for a man to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other people’s. Mine occupies me constantly. Good afternoon, gentlemen!” (*A Christmas Carol,* pp. 14-15)

 Scrooge claims ignorance in the face of the needs all around him, claiming, “*It’s not my business*.” This time, however, his aloof attitude toward others is challenged by the two gentlemen who have made it their business to look about them and perceive the suffering of the world. A little later in the book, Scrooge is confronted by the ghost of his old business partner, Jacob Marley, who warns him of the ghostly visitations that will happen that evening. During their conversation, Marley expresses regret at the selfish way that he spent his life and encourages his old friend to avoid the same mistakes he made. Scrooge tries to reassure Marley and himself, “But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,” to which Marley cries out, “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of business” (*A Christmas Carol,* p. 24). With Marley’s words Scrooge was warned!

 In the same way, John the Baptist’s voice rings out to us, warning us to pay attention to the plight of others. His words, like Marley’s, urge us to change our ways or face the horrible consequences of our actions. Yet John’s preaching seems a bit out of place in this season of Advent and Christmas. How does this wild prophet’s bold message of repentance and judgment correspond to Christmas message of peace and goodwill? Why is this passage from Luke’s Gospel even part of the Advent cycle of biblical readings? Think back to last week’s reading from Luke’s Gospel, where Zechariah declared that his son John would “be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:76-77).

On the first Sunday of Advent we learned that *Advent* means “coming,” and during this season we reflect upon the *three* Advents of Christ: in Bethlehem as a baby, within our lives spiritually, and at the end of time in glory and majesty. On this third Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist prepares the way for the Lord by calling each one of us to *repent*, to turn from our sin and to return to God in true faith and commitment. In so doing, we prepare our hearts for the Advent of Christ. “The joy and the challenge of Advent is that in Jesus Christ our God is coming, and our aching and longing for God will be met.” Yet Christ’s coming into our lives and into our world will undoubtedly challenge the status quo and disturb our complacency (<http://saltandlighttv.org/blogfeed/getpost.php?id=42788>).

**2.** **John’s Challenge: *Produce Fruit in Keeping with Repentance***

Last week we heard Zechariah’s predictions about the role that his son would play in the coming of the Messiah. In Luke chapter three, we see the fulfilment of that prediction as John, now a grown man, travels around the region of the Jordan River, “*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” (3:3). In this way, his life and ministry fulfilled Isaiah’s prophesy for he was “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Luke 3:4; Isaiah 40:3-5). John’s fearless preaching prepared the way of the Lord as many people sought forgiveness for their sins and turned to God.

Responding to his message, the crowds came to him, wanting to be baptized, but he had some harsh and challenging words for them. “*Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your life that must change, not your skin* ” (3:7-8, *The Message*). Other translations read, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” So, John is saying that true repentance is more than just getting into Jordan River and having water splash on you. Repentance is more than feeling remorse and confessing our sins. It entails a *change* in our lives. New Testament scholar Darrell Bock writes, “God wants us to come to him in repentance, but he calls us to him so that he may grace us with *a changed heart* and *a changed life*” (*Luke,* p. 69). While this changed life is the product of God’s work within us, we must express openness and intentionality toward God in order for this to happen. Repentance is turning from our self-centred, rebellious ways and saying, “Yes” to God and accepting what he wants to do in our lives.

Even people who think that they’re “religious” need to turn to God. John declares that this is not the time to bank on our religious heritage. To the crowds of devout Jews who came to the shores of the Jordan River, he said, “Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones” (3:8). I completely understand how easy it was for John’s audience to be confident in their religious standing because, after all, they were the *chosen people*, *the children of Abraham*. In the same way it’s easy for us to breeze through our days and weeks without thinking much about God. Every Sunday it’s easy to go through the motions of church, thinking that we’re serving God. It’s easy to say that we’re Christians, yet live like atheists. But God wants so much more; he wants our hearts and lives. John confronted the spiritual complacency of the children of Abraham by asserting that God could transform the stones on the ground into children of Abraham (3:9). In the same way, John’s words challenge our spiritual complacency. So we can’t lull ourselves into spiritual stagnation by saying, “I’ve been a Baptist all my life” or “I’ve been a member of this church for 30 years,” or “I grew up in a Christian home,” or “I’m a pastor.”

Instead of resting on our religious laurels, John calls us to consider the condition of our lives. “*What counts is your life*,” he declares, “*Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire*” (3:9, *The Message*). When we hear John’s words we should be filled with the desire for God to produce the kind of fruit in our lives that shows that we have turned from our sinful, self-centredness and completely surrendered to him. So the act of repentance is not a one-shot deal but a continual, daily process of re-orienting our lives to God.

Yet this is not a passive activity on our part; it requires decisive action. When the people heard John’s preaching, they responded and asked him, “*What should we do*?” (3:10). Like any good preacher, he offered concrete suggestions of the rubber-hits-the-road variety. To the crowds gathered there, John replied, “If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry” (3:11). Share with others if you have more than you need.

Amidst the crowd of those seeking baptism were some *tax collectors*, who came to John and said, “Teacher, what should we do?” (3:12). To them he replied, “Collect no more taxes than the government requires” (3:13). In Roman tax system the persons who submitted the best bid received the right to collect taxes. The successful person would pay Rome the amount he bid, but he would collect more than that to pay his expenses and to earn a profit. There was, of course, a strong temptation to collect even more tax than necessary in order to maximize profits. Cognizant of this type of corruption, John instructed the tax collectors to collect only the most basic amount of tax. Don’t take advantage of others and treat people fairly.

Also in the crowd were some *soldiers*, agents of the government who were tasked with keeping law and order. They approached John with the same question, “What should we do?” (3:14). John gave them this challenge, “Don’t extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay” (3:14). At that time soldiers were paid only enough to maintain a basic standard of living. In their position of power over the people, there was a temptation to use threats of violence or false charges in order to coerce people to give them money. Instead of abusing their authority and using their muscle for financial gain, John instructs them to find contentment with what they have. Don’t use your authority to oppress others.

In all three cases John’s responses were intensely practical and directly related to their occupations and personal relationships. He didn’t tell the tax collectors or soldiers to give up their jobs; rather, he encouraged them to perform their jobs faithfully and ethically. He didn’t tell the crowd to give away all of their goods; instead, he urged them to give their surplus food and clothing to those in need. In all three cases John is asking those who have power, authority or advantage over others, to be gracious and generous toward them. In all three cases John is admonishing people to adopt a simple standard of living and not to let greed cause them to be tight-fisted, unjust or tyrannical toward others. John’s admonitions still ring true today. True repentance is a matter of the heart and it results in a change in our *every day* behaviour.

We need to respond to John’s call to repentance and need to ask ourselves, “What shall we do?” Does our everyday behaviour in our places of work, in our homes, in our neighbourhoods, and in our relationships reflect our claim to be followers of Christ? Is true repentance evident in our just and compassionate treatment of others? Are our lives green, blossoming and producing fruit?

**3. The Messiah’s Baptism: *The Holy Spirit and Fire***

 John’s message and ministry had a significant impact on the people. So much so that some began to wonder if he was God’s Messiah, the Chosen One who would establish God’s reign on earth (3:15). Somehow John sensed the crowd’s messianic expectations and laid their speculations about him to rest. He realized that he was not the centre of God’s plan and he told the people that someone *greater* was coming (3:16). John expressed a genuine humility for such a powerful preacher. He had every reason to feel good about his accomplishments: his prophetic ministry has been a great success as crowds of people responded to this message and were baptized. Yet amidst all the clamour, John knew that he paled in comparison to the Messiah who was about to come. He knew that his status, as great as it was, was still not good enough to rise to the level of being the Messiah’s slave and untie his sandals (3:16).

 John also realized that his ministry of baptizing people was also inferior to the Messiah’s baptism. His was a preliminary one, done in the waters of Jordan, signifying a turning from sin and a turning to God. The greater baptism, the Messiah’s baptism will be with the *Holy* *Spirit* and *fire*. This baptism is the empowering and purifying work of the Spirit in the life of every Christian. This is good news for every believer who desires for the work of God in his or her life. John’s challenge to us to produce good fruit in keeping with repentance is achieved through the Spirit’s work in our lives. Think back to our reflections on Galatians. We know that when we live, walk, are led by and keep in step with the Spirit, he will produce in us that wonderful fruit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:16, 18, 22-23, 26).

The Holy Spirit is also a *refining fire,* burning off the impurities of our lives and purifying us. Last Sunday, we sang that beautiful song, *Refiner’s Fire.* Let it be your daily prayer.

*Purify my heart
Let me be as gold and precious silver
Purify my heart
Let me be as gold, pure gold*
*Refiner's fire
My heart's one desire
Is to be holy
Set apart for You, Lord
I choose to be holy
Set apart for You, my Master
Ready to do Your will*

(<https://genius.com/Vineyard-worship-refiners-fire-lyrics>)

 Eugene Peterson’s translation of John’s words captures their full impact: “I’m baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned” (3:16-17, *The Message*). God, through His Spirit, wants to clean house and make a clean sweep of our lives. Can we be open enough to let him do his work? Will we give him access to those locked rooms of our lives, letting him to clean up and dispose of the trash?

This Advent, may the words of that marvellous hymn, *Joy to the Word,* fill our minds and hearts - “Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her King*. Let every heart prepare Him room.*”