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Isaiah 58:6-12; Luke 3:2-18
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Do the Good that Is Yours

It's Christmastime and you know that means? 'Tis the season for the next Marvel Movie. Yes, Christmas is the best super hero story ever, but besides Jesus who would you say is the greatest human created super hero?

We love our super hero stories. Though the characters might be different, they all basically have the same plot. There is a villain who is creating chaos and destruction in Gotham. Then people wait for their super hero to come along. When he or she does, they fight the villain, save the day, while the people sit and watch in awe. At the end, they clap.

In his TED Talk, musician, speaker, and author David Lamotte poses the question, "So how realistic is this? Not at all," he says. "The world is not changed by super heroes, but by ordinary people, like you and me, making small impacts."¹

Two thousand years ago, God's people were also waiting for a super hero, called the Messiah, or God's anointed. One who would rescue them from the chaos and evil created by corrupt politicians in their world. But they weren't willing to do anything about it themselves.

Enter John the Baptist. This guy shook up Israel like none other. Yes, the Messiah was coming. But what John called them to in the meantime was to do the good that was theirs.

In a nutshell, John said, "Stop standing around. Stop waiting for someone else to save the day. Act now."

Join me as we read from Luke 3:2-18

Luke 3:2-18

2 During the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. **3** He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **4** As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

¹"Why heroes don't change the world" by David Lamotte. *TEDx Talks*. July 30, 2024. [youtube.com/watch?v=UDHrgQ5NmI4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDHrgQ5NmI4)

5 Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

6 And all people will see God's salvation.”

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

10 “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

11 John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

13 “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

14 Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” 18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

Please join me in a prayer for illumination.

Not a text that we often hear at Christmastime. Usually it comes sometime after the first of the year and just before Jesus’ baptism. Because by this time, John and Jesus were adults. It had probably been thirty years since Jesus’ birth.

So why are we hearing this now and why weren’t people going to the temple for the Word of the Lord? What does God require of us? How can we begin to combat the evil forces in our world and do the good that is ours?

Lets answer the first question, why are we hearing this now and why weren’t people going to the temple for the Word of the Lord?

Well the Word of the Lord isn't relegated to a religious calendar. God speaks whenever, however and through whomever God chooses. That's why we are hearing it today.

Notice that people weren't going to Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests, of the Jerusalem temple, to hear God. No! They were traveling out of their way, into the Judean wilderness, to the desert, to listen to this crazy guy named John the Baptist who spoke truth and called them to repent for the forgiveness of sins.

You see the religious authorities in their day had become so embedded with the Roman government that they were no longer a trusted voice. The high priests were appointed by Roman rulers usually in return for pledges of loyalty and outright bribes. Rome knew that if they could keep the Jewish religious structure under their thumb that they could basically come in and do whatever the heck they wanted.

Folks this is why our founding fathers advocated for a separation of Church and state. They knew that politics and religion make terrible bedfellows. When married together, there is no accountability to make sure our elected officials do what is right and best for all people.

And so I believe the Church needs "To be a voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him...not crooked ones."

That's what John the Baptist did.

He went out into the wilderness, away from the corruption, away from the influence of the world to say what God had put on his heart.

"Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins."

The Greek word for repentance comes from the root word metanoia. It basically means to turn around and head 180 degrees in the opposite direction. Stop the wrong that we are doing and change course. In the military, we call it an "about face."

So like the crowds listening to John the Baptist, we ask what should we do?

When the crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers asked that of John the Baptist, he broke it down into bite sized chunks that they could sink their teeth into. Because sometimes when we encounter huge problems like Christian Nationalism, or corrupt politics, or judicial injustice, or systemic racism, or climate change, or fentanyl addictions, or immigration issues, or homelessness, or corporate greed, it can feel overwhelming to think that we can make any kind of systemic change ourselves. So we do nothing.

Someone once said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing."

John the Baptist told the crowd, "The person with two tunics should share with those who has none. The person with extra food should do the same."

He told the tax collectors, “Don’t collect more than you are required to.”

He told the soldiers, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely - be content with your pay.”

Each group thought. “Ok, we can do that.”

Small changes, overtime, eventually change the whole system.

When people heard the authority with which John the Baptist spoke, they mistakenly assumed that maybe he was the super hero they had waited for. And he said plainly, “I’m not he. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of who’s sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

Then John the Baptist did the most important thing he could do, he pointed people to Jesus. Turn to Jesus and be saved!

Ok, so again, what should we do?

We need to remember that Jesus Christ was born into a world that was not much different than today. It was deeply troubled with sin, oppression, and suffering. If Jesus were born today, I bet he’d come to a poor Palestinian refugee family living in a tent amidst the rubble of Gaza.

We need pray and be watchful. We need to keep our eyes wide open to all of the injustice in our world and we need to not be afraid to call it out.

We need to trust that the Holy Spirit who lives in us will help us discern when something doesn’t seem right.

We may need to write to our local politicians and national law makers.

We may might need to even protest peacefully and let our voices be heard. Murdering an insurance CEO in cold blood on the streets of New York City like what we saw in the news this past week is NOT the way to protest the injustice of the insurance industry. One injustice doesn’t correct another.

We need to do what we can in our local area knowing that it only takes a spark to start a movement.

We need to take heed of the Prophet Isaiah, who said and I paraphrase,

When something is wrong, say and do something.

When someone is hungry, feed them. Work at the Food Bank.

When someone is homeless, give them a place to stay. Volunteer with the Winter Housing Overflow.

When someone is naked, clothe them. Offer your time at the Giving Closet.

When someone is oppressed, break the yoke and set them free.

When someone makes a racist or inappropriate remark, tell them you don’t appreciate it.²

² Isaiah 58:6-12

The Prophet Micah said, “Do what is right. Love kindness or mercy. And walk humbly with your God.”³

And finally, we we need to point others to Jesus who himself told us “Love God. Love others as you love yourself. And treat them the same way you wish to be treated”⁴

This weekend at our Men’s breakfast, we talked about vocation. The word vocation comes from the Latin word “vocare” which means to call out. It’s where we get the idea of a vocation being a calling. Author and Pastor Frederick Buechner said, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

However we answer that question for ourselves...that is our calling...that is the good that is ours to do.

The Prophet Isaiah says, “If you do this, then
8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

11 The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.

You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.

12 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

Repairers of Broken Walls and Restorers of Streets with Dwellings. Who wouldn’t want to be called that by the Lord.

What is holding us back from taking these words to heart? Consider our unique gifts, perspectives, talents, and resources. How is God calling us this morning to repent and to move into action in our actual, everyday life?

This season of Advent reminds us that Jesus Christ came into a world fraught with the very same issues of injustice and inequality that we face, and he did not turn away. Instead, he showed us a way forward: engaged action rooted in compassion.

³ Micah 6:8

⁴ Matthew 22:39; Luke 6:31

My friends, we are uniquely situated to bring light into the world. May we find courage this season to do the good that is ours to do. May we believe that it matters. And may we see the ripples of our actions expand outward, touching lives and mending the fabric of our fractured nation and our broken world. Amen.

Inhale: God of goodness,

Exhale: Guide my hands.