

Third Sunday of Advent  
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish  
St. Francisville, LA  
16 December 2018

Luke 3:7-8

Imagine a world without electricity, internet, and 24-hour news cycles. A world without newspapers, radio stations, UPS, FedEx, or the US post Office. How do you suppose news would be shared with the masses? How would small towns throughout the land know the king has defeated an enemy army in foreign territory, the queen has had a new baby, or the king's birthday plans? How would people know of new edicts and laws demanded by the king? The short answer to these questions is that a rather sophisticated network of news announcers developed early on in the history of the world. I have a friend who calls these people "Town's Cryers". A Cryer would travel to larger towns where news from the capital would be delivered. They would listen to the news for the week or the month, collect official communications from the King or Emperor, and then bring these news to the local towns. Then, like Jonah crying out in Nineveh (Jonah 3:4), the announcer would cry out his news in the main squares or gathering places. Of course, travelers would also take and bring news from one town to the next, but the words of the "Town's Cryer" were official and sanctioned.

The message these cryers brought to the towns were often considered "Evangelion" or "Good News." This term proceeded John the Baptist and Jesus. The "Good News" was often news of the Emperor and the Emperor's family. Royal birthdays, marriages, victories, concessions to a particular town or city, etc. Edicts and new laws proclaimed by the cryer were also considered "good news" because they were communications directly from the Emperor, who was considered the father of the nation, the protector, and the law giver. Finally, it was the duty of the Town Cryers to announce the Emperor's visits to the cities and towns of the nation, with sufficient time for the town to prepare and get ready for the Emperor's visit. There was much planning that needed to take place and if the Cryer was late in announcing this imminent arrival, the town could lose valuable time to prepare. There are streets to clean up, roads that need beautification, town debris to be removed, useless road hazards to be hauled away, etc.

Today we hear that John proclaimed the good news to the people with many exhortations. John the Baptist is God's Town Cryer announcing the Good News of the Celestial King, God himself. It is his job to announce the good news that the King was coming to earth. It is his job to announce that God has a son, God has sent this son into the world to save Israel, and this son will be among us very soon. God's own son was in Israel's midst and it was John's duty to announce this arrival. He is the one crying out in the desert, "Prepare the way for the Lord." God has chosen to break into our human world to fulfill the prophets of all, as Zephaniah tells us today, "The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival."

It was often the duty of the Town Cryer to tell the people what to do to prepare for the Emperor's arrival and John is no exception. The King is coming and there are things the people need to do: they must "Bear the fruits of repentance." The people who hear John's message want more specifics. What does this mean, to bear fruits of repentance? What does this look like? What specifically shall we do? Three groups ask this question. The first group is the crowds, who ask, "What then shall we do?" To them John responds, "If you have two loaves, share one. If you have food, share it with those who don't have any!" Two other groups ask the same question. They represent the imperial power of the day. Soldiers and tax collectors work for the empire and they would have known how important it was to prepare for the coming of the Emperor. Their appearance in this story is not coincidental. The preaching of the good news of Jesus is made within the shadows of the empire. The true king is coming and those in power must change their ways to prepare for his arrival. They must treat others with justice, they must not extort money with threats and accusations, they must not collect more taxes than allowed, they must repent of their misdeeds and amend their lives. This message applies as much to the crowds as it applies to those in power hearing John.

Preparation requires a lot of work. This work is to produce fruit worthy of repentance and this fruit may be different for us today than it was for those in First Century Palestine. Preparation for us may mean to fast from our screens, so that we can let the message of Christmas sink in. It may mean to make a concerted effort to forgive all of those people who have offended us, so we may approach Christmas with a clean heart and a clean soul. It may mean to make those phone calls to loved ones we have postponed for months or years. To reach out, to connect, to engage, to be fully present in people's lives, to become a part of something greater than ourselves. Preparation for us may mean to share what we have with those who have so very little, both in our communities and in our world.

There is another aspect of preparation that I want to emphasize today and that is the experience of gratefulness and joy. These last two weeks we have spoken about how Advent begins in darkness and in the desert. Today, we light the pink candle to remind us that Advent points to great joy. Today we celebrate the soon-to-come King. After getting the town of our heart ready, cleaning the streets of garbage, and beautifying the space of our hearts, we now are filled with joy because the baby is almost here. Using the metaphor of pregnancy, we can say that the nursery is ready, the crib is assembled, the walls have been painted, the carpet has been replaced, and the room is ready. Now we remember how long it took us to get pregnant, how long we have waited for this child, how much we want this baby in our lives, and we give thanks to God that he is almost here. Today we

remember God's great mercy and grace. God has chosen to intervene in our lives directly. God has remembered his people and has chosen to dwell among us. This gives us great reason for celebration and joy. Today we pause the repentance themes of Advent and we celebrate the imminent arrival of our Savior.

Today is a great day for remembrance and anticipation. We remember how God has acted in our lives in former days. How his faithfulness and love towards us has been a constant reality in our lives. There were times when we felt like our lives were over and there was no hope, yet, God intervened and we survived and

became stronger. There were times when we have been ill to the point of fearing for our lives, yet we are still here, alive and well. There were times when financial reversals filled us with worry, and yet, we are here still fighting, still striving, still moving forward. There have been so many episodes of darkness in our lives when we felt very distant from God, yet, we are here this morning celebrating God's mercy and goodness. Today is a great day for remembrance and thanksgiving. We have a God who loves us deeply and who walks alongside us every day.

I pray that you allow yourself a moment of joy today. I pray you give yourself a break from any shame or guilt today. You are deeply loved. The Town Cryer reminds us today that our Lord is very near. He has come to save the lame and gather the outcast. He has come to change our shame into praise, to bring us home to himself, to restore our fortunes and remove all tears from our eyes. Our king is at hand and he brings good news of salvation. Our God is in our midst, and he brings hope and joy to all the brokenhearted. I pray you may welcome him into your heart today. He loves you and wants a relationship with you. Amen!