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Sermon – Luke 3:7-18
December 16, 2018

I should have put “to be continued . . .” at the end of my sermon last week, because the story this week is literally the continuation of John the Baptist, as you heard, so let us re-enter that world . . . let us pray,

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last week we got a glimpse into the lives of those who flock to John the Baptist. They crowd around him to hear him preach. Their religious leaders have been waiting for a new word from God – could this be it? They have been ruled by the Romans since their great great grandparents walked on the earth; they say, once we were freed from Egypt and we will be freed again! They constantly struggle to scrape together enough resources to survive another day while those in authority take everything they can possibly manipulate out of them. They live each day in a low state of panic about the entitled ruling class and any Roman soldiers we see roaming about.

John speaks a strong word to those gathered about what it is going to take to break the patterns of violence that are so engrained in their culture. They are used to leaning on their lineage of Abraham, but John is clear, this is going to require their active participation. It is going to take the inner work of repentance, the mystery of ritual and the outer work of intentional behaviour to loosen the practices of scarcity and injustice that have lived so long here.

The crowds ask, “What shall we do?” John’s answer speaks directly to the core of the socio-economic struggle of the peasants. He gives practical instruction to everyone present. For each cross section of society present, John calls for justice for people on the margins. For the peasants, if you have something extra, share it, because you know there are people next to you who don’t have enough . . . and you remember what that was like. Tax collectors come from a slightly different social location – they get a cut of the taxes they collect, so they are motivated to collect as much as possible. What should we do? Collect only the amount prescribed to you. Stop bleeding the pockets of the people who are

already overtaxed; they cannot survive. These soldiers in the crowd likely were not Romans, but came from Herod's personal army. One might imagine their boss is not generous with their wages; still John tells them, "do not extort money from anyone. You get a wage; be satisfied with it. Do you think these people can afford your greed?"

I love how direct he is, how forthright and clear his words are. First, share with one another and don't take what isn't yours. As Jesus' ministry ramps up and he begins preaching about the kingdom of God, the message goes further to say, become servants of each other. But for now, what shall we do? Rule #1, the first lesson, is to do no harm. Take only what is yours and leave what is theirs. What shall we do? Care for those who need it most; do not be greedy; do not take what is not yours. If you have a little extra, share it with those who need it.

James and I spent Thursday morning at the ferry line, collecting donations for PHC Christmas hampers. Whether or not the islanders knew it, what they were doing was quite biblical, giving something extra to those in need during this season of preparation. Collections for PHC are happening all over the island so that all, regardless of circumstance can feel the abundance and joy God created for us. As we know, the work of the gospel only begins with sharing resources. The systemic issues - sustainable housing, climate change, affordable resources - still await transformation - that is the long game of God's kingdom.

As he speaks truth to the masses, John's life becomes this ministry of preparation. He baptizes crowds of people each day and accumulates disciples. Even as popular as he becomes, John never forgets his particular role in the God's redemption. "One who is more powerful than I is coming . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John is the one who always points toward the messiah. Everything we are doing is to prepare for his arrival. The people can't conceive that when John bids them come and prepare for God to draw close, God would actually come in human form to share with them in their human experience. It's hard for us even to fully wrap our minds around what that means.

He comes to consume our pain and brokenness, as a fire consumes the chaff, and transform it all into something beautiful and life-giving.