

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Luke 3:7-20

December 16, 2018

Third Sunday in Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Although he and his family never officially joined the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, President Abraham Lincoln worshiped there regularly, just three blocks from the White House. The Lincolns developed a close relationship with the church's minister, Dr. Phineas Gurley, a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary. Dr. Gurley and his wife dined many times at the White House. The President and First Lady attended the wedding of the Gurleys' daughter. Mary Todd Lincoln sent Dr. Gurley letters and gifts.

Dr. Gurley also was with the Lincoln family in the midst of tragedy. He preached the funeral sermon in the White House East Room for eleven year old Willie Lincoln. He was called to the President's bedside on April 15, 1865 and stayed there until Abraham Lincoln died. Dr. Gurley preached the funeral sermon at the state funeral at the White House, conducted a private service at the U.S. Capitol, prayed as the President's casket left the Capitol and again as it reached the train station, accompanied the President's body on the train to Springfield, Illinois, and concluded the burial service by reciting a prayer and hymn he had written on the train ride.¹

Despite their close relationship, the President sometimes didn't shy away from an honest evaluation of Dr. Gurley's preaching. As President Lincoln was leaving a Wednesday night service, one of his assistants asked, "Mr. President, what did you think of the sermon tonight?" The President replied, "The content was excellent, and Dr. Gurley spoke with great eloquence. It was obvious that he put a great deal of work into that sermon." The assistant pressed the issue, "Then you thought it was a great sermon, Mr. President?" to which the President replied, "No, I did not say that." Somewhat confused the aide protested, "But, Sir, you said it was an excellent sermon." President Lincoln answered, "No, I said that the content was excellent and that the preacher spoke with eloquence. But Dr. Gurley, on this night, forgot one important matter. He forgot to ask us to do something great."²

Out there in the wilderness desert, beyond the Jordan, John the Baptist didn't forget to ask the people who had come out to be baptized to do something great. Three times John was asked, "What should we do?" John gave three specific answers:

* To the crowds, he said, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food do likewise."

* To the tax collectors he said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.'

* To the soldiers he said, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As one writer has put it, “There is much that can be said about this little [story, *sic.*], but, more importantly, there is much that we must do if we listen to it.”³

And it’s not just here in John’s instructions, but we find the same message scattered throughout the scriptures:

* James 2:14-17: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? . . . If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”

* 1 John 3:17: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”

* Matthew 5:3-11: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

* Matthew 5:38-42: “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

* Matthew 25:37-40: “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

Of course, all of these answers to the question “What should we do?” are summed up in the words of the prophet Micah. You can almost hear the people back then asking the same question about how to be God’s people — “What should we do?” — “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” Tell us, Lord, what should we do? And the prophet Micah answered, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:6-8)

Share your coat — be kind to other people — don’t abuse your authority — practice what you preach — put your faith into action — help others when they need it — go

the extra mile — give somebody a cup of cold water — welcome the stranger — drop in for a visit . . .

from the world's point of view, these might not seem much like something great. But from the kingdom of God's perspective, these simple acts of kindness and integrity and service **are** something great.

A couple of years ago I subscribed to a daily email called “. . . in the meantime,” written by Lutheran pastor David Lose. In his blog from last Tuesday he wrote about John the Baptist telling the crowds in the wilderness what they should do to show they have truly repented. Here's what he had to say: “What I find extraordinary about this is how mundane, if not downright obvious, John's admonition proves. I mean, this is not rocket-science; indeed, it is the logic of the classroom and playground most of us first heard in kindergarten: share, be fair, don't bully. But if somewhat obvious, it is at least also within their reach. John does not tell the crowds to join him in the wilderness, he does not ask the tax-collectors to abandon or betray Rome, and he does not urge soldiers to a life of pacifism. Instead, he points them to the very places in which they already live and work, love and laugh, struggle and strive, and suggests that these places are precisely where God calls them to be, where God is at work in them and through them for the sake of the world.”

Bringing John's early first century message in the wilderness to bear on our early twenty-first century lives, he goes on to say, “Perhaps this is the element of John's preaching we're called to model, point out all the places our people have a chance to live their faith here and now, amid a culture that without a doubt favors indulgence over compassion and self-expression over sacrifice, but that nevertheless provides countless opportunities to witness to God's commitment to meet us where we are, accept us as we are, and make good use of us to care for those around us.”⁴

Last week we heard a roll call of the powerful political and religious leaders of Jesus' day, the ones who called the shots, the ones who maintained the status quo for their own benefit, the rulers who wanted to be remembered for doing something great, at least in the world's eyes. In that political and religious context, John came preaching his message of baptism and repentance and seemingly unimportant ways of living and acting, day in and day out.

But the life John described to the people who asked “What should we do?” is the kind of life God's kingdom people live. It's certainly the kind of life Jesus lived. And it's the kind of life we are called to live here and now, in this in-between time as we celebrate the first Advent of our Savior and await his second Advent in God's good time.

In John's preaching in the wilderness, in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, in James' instructions to the early church, in Micah's words 2,800 years ago — the heart of the message on this third Sunday of Advent is humility before God and the way we treat one another. It has been said, “Repentance has to do with ethics, with action, with the Holy Spirit's compelling us to be God's hands and feet in the world — with attention to the needs of others rather than preoccupation with our own salvation.”⁵

At Bible study on Wednesday morning, Tut Hall showed me a poem she had stuck in the front of her Bible. It is called “I Am a Christian” by Maya Angelou. When I

researched the poem, I discovered that Maya Angelou didn't write the poem (she even made this clear on her website). Somehow her name got attached to a poem called "When I Say, 'I Am a Christian'" and the internet went wild with it. The original poem was actually written by a woman named Carol Wimmer in 1988.

According to Carol Wimmer, "I had begun to sense increasing societal resentment within American culture toward the attitude of self-righteousness that has been adopted by so many Christians. I knew such behavior was, and is, a *distortion* of Christianity. Thus, the sentiment of the poem was born out of my personal awareness of this distortion and the heartache it causes in society."

Here is the original version of the poem, "When I Say, 'I Am a Christian'":

*When I say, "I am a Christian," I'm not shouting, "I've been saved!"
I'm whispering, "I get lost! That's why I chose this way."*

*When I say, "I am a Christian," I don't speak with human pride.
I'm confessing that I stumble — needing God to be my guide.*

*When I say, "I am a Christian," I'm not trying to be strong.
I'm professing that I'm weak and pray for strength to carry on.*

*When I say, "I am a Christian," I'm not bragging of success.
I'm admitting that I've failed and cannot ever pay the debt.*

*When I say, "I am a Christian," I don't think I know it all.
I submit to my confusion asking humbly to be taught.*

*When I say, "I am a Christian," I'm not claiming to be perfect.
My flaws are too visible, but God believes I'm worth it.*

*When I say, "I am a Christian," I still feel the sting of pain.
I have my share of heartache which is why I seek His name.*

*When I say, "I am a Christian," I do not wish to judge.
I have no authority — I only know I'm loved.⁶*

As I end this sermon, I don't want to be like Dr. Phineas Gurley at a Wednesday night service at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, and forget one important matter. I want to ask you to do something great. In this Advent season — and in every season — do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. Be fair with one another. Be kind to the strangers in our midst. Put your faith into action. Produce fruit worthy of repentance.

When you do something great like this, not only do you make the world a better place for everyone, but you also prepare your hearts and lives for the One who is coming again — our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Come, Lord Jesus!

Let us pray: Eternal God, let the fire of your Holy Spirit purge us of our greed and deceit, so that, purified, we may find our peace and joy in you. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near, your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹“New York Avenue Presbyterian Church,” at Abraham Lincoln Online at www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/sites/nyave.htm

²Taken from a sermon by Robert T. Baggott, “Getting There,” Luke 3:7-18, December 16, 2012, at www.day1.org. Rev. Baggott cites Dan McCarthy, “Great Leadership” Newsletter, February 10, 2011.

³James Shenko, “A Baptism of Repentance — Luke 3:1-6,” December 3, 2018 at www.politicaltheology.com.

⁴David Lose, “Advent 3C: Beyond Scolding,” December 11, 2018 at www.davidlose.net.

⁵Austin Crenshaw Shelley, “‘If we can’t afford two boxes,’ my grandmother said, ‘we can’t afford one,’” December 16, Advent 3C, November 6, 2018 at www.christiancentury.org.

⁶Carol Wimmer, “When I Say I Am a Christian: The Story Behind the Words,” at www.whenisayiamachristian.com.