Sermon for 3rd Sunday of Advent

December 12, 2021

Luke 3:7-18

I spent time this past week pondering some writings about repentance. The central figure in the story spent a lot of time in the wilderness. He seems kind of grumpy and judgmental, not really the kind of person you’d want to hang out with or invite over for dinner.

I speak not of John the Baptizer, but of…the Grinch.

We are told the Grinch hated Christmas, but we are not told *why*. The narrator speculates that the Grinch’s head was not screwed on right, or his shoes were too tight. He concludes that it’s probably because the Grinch’s heart was two sizes too small.

I assume you know the story of the Grinch, how he held a grudge against his neighbors, which allowed his heart to be hardened toward the Whos. So he decides to ruin Christmas for the Whos and steal their food, decorations, and presents. When the Grinch experiences a Christmas miracle, his heart grows three sizes.

The way that Dr. Seuss tells this story allows us to see ourselves in it. We’re offered an invitation to ponder our own grinchiness, Our own need for repentance.

It’s a shame, though, that the Grinch makes it look so easy.

Because repentance is the hardest work we do.

Today’s passage from Luke reminds us that Advent isn’t just about preparing to celebrate Jesus’ birth. It’s also about preparing ourselves for judgment when Christ returns.

Advent invites us to ponder the need for God to send Jesus to live as a human being, preach and teach and heal, die on the cross, and be raised again.

And that need is our sinfulness.

We can—and should—find comfort in the promises that God has assured our salvation through Jesus. But we shouldn’t forget that we are called to a different way of being in the world. We are called to turn away from our sinfulness, from the things that tempt us into sin — our grudges, our desires for power, wealth, glory — and to turn to toward God. Turning toward God is what allows us to bear the fruit of the Spirit and to know joy.

But we are too easily tempted back to the easier path. The path toward sin, and away from God.

To understand what John the Baptizer is doing and talking about, we need to understand what immersion, or baptism, meant to people in his time.

Immersion was an established practice for faithful Jews. It was a part of how people made themselves ready to go to the temple. It was about ritual impurity, not about moral impurity. Immersion made them ritually clean and made them ready to be in the presence of God.

But John takes the concept and upends it. Instead of being about ritual impurity, John’s baptism was about moral impurity. He tied it to the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, about God’s coming presence among us.

John told his audience that the Messiah was coming, and while John baptized them with water, the Messiah would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He uses some, quite frankly, *terrifying* language about chopping down trees, about separating wheat from chaff, and burning that chaff with an unquenchable fire.

Dr. Seuss made it easy for us to see ourselves in the Grinch, but we should not, not even for a moment, be tempted to place ourselves in John’s sandals.

*We* are the brood of vipers. *We* are the ones in need of repentance. The ones who need to bear fruit worthy of our repentance, fruit that demonstrates that we have chosen the path that points to God, the path *away* from sinfulness.

But we should not, not even for a moment, think that being judged by God is bad news.

It is, in fact, the best news *ever*. Because it means that God isn’t finished with us yet.

When John speaks about us being baptized by fire, about wheat being gathered into the granary and chaff burned up, it’s tempting to think of those literally. Chaff can only be chaff, wheat can only be wheat. Therefore, if it’s applied to us, we are either wheat *or* chaff. Not both.

But when it comes to fire in the Bible, it’s most often associated with either God’s presence, like the burning bush, or with purification. I think these go hand in hand.

For us to be made clean, for us to be prepared to enter into eternal life in God’s presence, that which is impure in us must be removed.

This is God’s judgment of us.

In a sermon delivered during Advent in 1928, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and God’s coming at Christmas, that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God’s coming should arouse in us…God comes into the very midst of evil and death and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses us and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love.”

I don’t know what that’s going to be like, but Scripture seems to suggest it won’t be a terribly pleasant process. There are a number of passages that speak about burning away impurities.

But it’s a *necessary* process if we want to know eternal life with God.

What then should we do?

We ask ourselves what in us needs to be burned off. What in us needs to be made clean. What work we can do *now.*

And we *all* have a list.

Answering these questions is the beginning of the work of repentance.

But there is more. Because repentance means choosing a path different from the one we have been taking.

We’re called to choose a new way of understanding the world, rooted in the promise that God is present among us, that God’s kingdom is at hand, breaking into the world.

To bear fruit worthy of the hard work of repentance is to participate in the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.

I love the imagery of the Grinch’s heart growing 3 sizes. Having repented, having given up the space in his heart that was taken up by his grudge toward the Whos, his heart had more room for love and joy. When he gleefully returns the presents and the food and the decorations, *that’s* him bearing fruit worthy of his repentance.

The path toward God is filled with true peace and joy, hope and love. It allows our hearts to grow in size, in their capacity to store up the love God offers us. Love that is fertile soil for the fruit we are meant to bear.

May we choose the path toward God, the path of love and peace beyond all human understanding.