

*The Ways of God in a Wheat and Chaff World*

For about seven years I had the privilege of being the leader of a theological reading group in Charlotte. It was pedagogically dreadful because I just read out loud, and periodically we would stop and discuss what we read, yet somehow, we made our way through some very good books. But, no matter what the theological discussion, no matter how tedious or uplifting the class, there was one member who, whenever we finished, asked the same question. She would always ask, “Yes, but what are we supposed to *do*?”

Isn’t that the question, always? What to do?

That’s the question that should be asked of every prayer, every sermon, every sentence to call ourselves to worship – every creed we recite – and every bit of theology we read. The same question, each time, “What to do?”

I suppose I must have gotten asked the question one time too many, or else I finally felt at home enough among the group to say what I was really thinking, but finally one day the answer fell out of my mouth before I could stop it. I said, “You know perfectly well what you need to do, you just don’t want to do it.” As soon as I said it I wanted to take it back, but there it was flailing around in front of us. And then my friend began to chuckle and said, “Well, I suppose you’re right.”

It is easy for a church to fall into the habit of letting God do all the heavy lifting... indeed, we are expected to allow God to do all the heavy lifting!

The promise of the Gospel is that God has already done everything in Jesus Christ that needs to be done for salvation. From Calvin to Barth and every reformed theologian in between, the affirmation is the same, that in Jesus Christ, God did absolutely everything necessary for our salvation.

As the Nicene Creed says, “For us and our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.”

The Study Catechism of our denomination, published in the late nineties, puts an even finer point on it, asking, “How do you understand the love and power of God,” and answering, “Through Jesus Christ. In his life of compassion, his death on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead, I see how vast is God’s love for the world – a love that is ready to suffer for our sakes, yet so strong that nothing will prevail against it.”

The redemption won in Jesus Christ doesn't come lightly. The incarnation of God that we anticipate in Advent and celebrate in Christmas is an offering of blood and flesh for the sake of humankind. And so, by definition, it is a costly act.

Any faith worth having doesn't lie around in salvific slumber. Any faith worth having must surely come with a word of *challenge* to us, and in our text this morning, John the Baptist has that challenge - he is preaching repentance.

And as soon as we say that, we need immediately to understand that repentance does not mean condemnation and damnation and all the worst of what we've heard from bad preaching. It does, however, mean *a deliberate change of course*.

When John begins preaching, it is as if he anticipates the justifications his hearers will offer for their failure to repent because no sooner does he preach his message of bearing the fruit of repentance than he immediately adds that bit about the children of Abraham, which of course means basically, "And don't think *just being religious* is going to make everything okay."

For us, that would be the equivalent of hearing a preacher calling us to repent, saying, "You didn't do this, this, this and this, and you did this and this and you need to repent," and replying, "Yes, but I'm a Presbyterian. We don't do repentance."

No when, John preaches his message of repentance he means it clearly and lest we have any lingering doubt about his sincerity in calling people to repent, to turn from one path on to a better one, John gets specific. God wants and expects the best from us, and it is the power of God in Jesus Christ that will bring it about.

There's an old chestnut of a preacher's story, where the preacher is going to town, preaching up a storm, and the congregation is listening intently. There are murmurs of affirmation and occasional interjections of "Amen, preacher."

Then, as the preacher gets closer and closer to home, the congregation falls silent. The murmurs cease, and the shouts of amen are stilled. Finally, one intrepid congregant shouts out to the errant preacher, "You done quit preaching and gone to meddling."

Most people are fine with preachers talking about repentance as long as we don't get too specific. Some people actually enjoy the specificity as long as we don't get too personal. But when the call to repent is both specific and personal, well...

That's when the preacher says, "you know perfectly well what you need to do, you just don't want to do it."

"If you have two coats, give one away," says John. "If you have an abundance of food, share," says John. "If you are a tax collector, take only what is due to the government and don't skim a profit," says John. "If you are a soldier, no extortion, no threatening, do only what is required," says John.

The call to repent is the call to be the best that we can.

It is easy, this time of year, to leave Jesus in the crèche, lying in a manger, you know, swaddling clothes and Silent Night, complete with the manger and the bovine incubator.

But when we encounter adult problems, it is the adult Jesus we need to hear.

The thing is, though, John's words tell us what is coming. We see the Baby Jesus only in Luke 2. For the rest of the story, we get grown up Jesus and he talks about things that grown-ups talk about.

You probably all know the Sermon on the Mount? It's the one in Matthew where Jesus begins with the Beatitudes – you know, blessed are you, blessed are you, blessed are you...? It's the sermon that motivated Gandhi and also Dr. King to preach their messages of non-violence. Well, Luke has a version of it too and in it, Jesus looks at the world in the way that it can be – he looks at the world with all of its brokenness through the lens of the old Testament prophets and see it as it can be – as it will be: a place of goodness, and the message he preaches calls all who hear to work for that coming kingdom even as we await the coming Christ.

And note this also: Before we hear the first word out of John, we read, "The word of the Lord came to him."

John is speaking with the authority of a prophet, of one who has been given the word of the Lord and he is calling for repentance, specifically and personally.

And whatever John has to say, he only foreshadows what is coming from Jesus. And when grown-up Jesus gets up to preach in Luke, he is preaching from the same vision of what the world can be that we see from John.

You see, while I can confidently tell you the good news of the Gospel that in Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven, and that in Jesus, God accomplished all that needed to be accomplished, while I can say these things with belief and conviction and relief and thanksgiving in light of these promises, I say them as well knowing God expects the best from us and will settle for nothing less.

I am very mindful that it is often far easier the church be *against* something than it is actually to be *for* something.

That is what is so striking about the specificity of John's sermon. He is actually calling the people in the river to be *for* something. Look at what he's saying:

You have two coats? How wonderful! You can help someone.

You have an abundance of food? What a blessing, you can give some to someone who needs it.

You're a tax collector? This one will be a challenge for some of us – well, civil society needs taxes. Do it honestly and fairly.

You're a soldier? Do your duty, and do it with honor. Don't bully or extort.

Fred Craddock looked at this text and said he called us to social responsibility.

You see, God made us to be *human* and what that means is that God expects the best of us. And if we want to know what it means to be truly *human*, then we need look no further than the grown-up Jesus who calls us to be mindful of all these things we have discussed.

We look at these sacred stories each year – and sometimes our lives are easy, and sometimes they are hard - and we hear them and they tell us something about who God is. And that is what we need to know – who God is – and Jesus Christ gives us our answer.

And there is nothing about God that is not revealed in Jesus – there is no other God behind the savior – and in the knowledge of who God is, we learn who we can be as well.

What to do, what to do?

The answer is to be *for* what God is *for*.

The message of Christian faith is not to be against anyone but rather to be *for everyone*, just as God has declared to be *for* us.

What's interesting about John's sermon about repentance is that he doesn't seem to assume a perfect world. He assumes that there is inequality. Indeed, he assumes that some people will have more than others – either through hard work or good fortune or a combination of the two – and he preaches that the way that God would have us go is the way of generosity. If you have two cloaks, well, you have an opportunity. You have abundant food... you have an opportunity – you have the opportunity to be part of redemption in a broken world.

The same with authority and power – he seems not to assume that everyone will have the same status – that some will, through hard work or good fortune, or a combination of both, find themselves with authority and influence – and he preaches that the way God would have us go is the way of kindness and compassion – and we have the opportunity to be part of redemption in a broken world.

From a certain point of view, it's really a pragmatic, intelligent sermon that would assure harmonious social relationships and care for the poor. It's possible, if you read it a certain way, to come away with certain relief: we ask the question "what to do?" and he gives us the answer in fairly understandable and practical ways... we could rest easily.

But then the world demands better answers. The world demands answers that matter... which is why John didn't stop with a simple call to repentance. He insisted on seeing a world where the Kingdom of God was among us. And that friends, is moving from preaching to meddling. And we all know what meddling got Jesus: a cross and a borrowed grave... and if you want to have the same outcome, you start meddling too.

That would be a *hopeless* message if that were all there was. But it's not. And our hope in a world that will always demand that we get to meddling and then give us our just reward for doing it is this: God is not done yet. There is still the word about the winnowing fork dividing the wheat from the chaff.

Just to be clear, because this could look like bad news unless we understand it right – we are not individually, as people, wheat or chaff. That wouldn't be good news. God does not make trash to be thrown away. But there is sin in the world and we all have wheat and chaff within us. And Jesus will pull out the wheat and leave the chaff, to lift our humanity and to use us to bring hope and redemption where it is needed.

There's no question but that God expects the very best of us. We do what we can, and we know that God will do the rest. When life tumbles in and bad things happen, and we see the worst in others, and not the best, we have God's word that it is not all, that sin never have the last word, not ever.

Did you know that when a chaff-fire starts it doesn't stop until it is done? And so it is with God – God will never be done until all is well and all is whole.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.