

John the Baptist is a wild, intense character. He is famous, of course, for baptizing Jesus among many others in the Jordan River, but also for his quirkiness and intensity. He is given words from God, announcing Jesus' arrival and indeed blessed to provide Jesus with his baptism to start his life of public ministry. But he's also not the person that most would expect to hear words of God from. He's kind of a hairy guy, known for eating bugs and honey and wearing bear fur to keep warm and dry. He's loud, and brash, and just really goes for it in his words and metaphors, like we heard today. Not exactly the well-mannered energy of most preachers we know today. And yet, he's the one God chose to baptize Jesus. He is Jesus' kinsman, a distant cousin, whose mothers were dear friends and they have a connection through both God and their human mothers. And this weird, confident, unlikely man is the one who brings the good news of Jesus, who he truly is, to the first gathered people before Jesus starts his ministry.

We are revisiting John the Baptist in our readings today, who provides clear instructions for what various gathered people are to do. John comes into this story with strong language, "you brood of vipers!" and really gets into it from the get go. The people look at him like, "alright, we're listening... trees will be cut down and thrown into the fire... what are we to do?". That incredible question that we so often ask as well. We hear all these powerful words of God and Jesus and about the movement of the Holy Spirit, and then the question follows - what are we to do about it?

John gives some concrete examples of what to do with the people gathered. Some of the people gathered were instructed simply to give an extra coat to someone who has need of it, particularly if they're wealthy enough to support someone else with such a necessary thing. And some of the people gathered are not what we would call "beloved by the community". Tax collectors were particularly frowned upon in the general society at this time because they often took advantage of other people for their own gain. They would say the government needed more money or goods from them in tax than they actually did, and kept the extra for themselves. So most people really reviled tax collectors because they never knew if they were being honest with what was needed in tax and

thought tax collectors were shady, abusive characters. John's advice to them? Only do what you need to for your job, collect only what you need, and stop taking advantage of vulnerable people. Kind of seems like the bare minimum for how to love people, not taking advantage of them, but the reminder was still rendered both necessary and powerful.

And after this, the soldiers gathered asked what they were to do - some soldiers were appreciated by the community for protection and by some soldiers for the rise in status that the military could provide. Other soldiers were understandably reviled for the unnecessary violence they perpetrated. John's advice to them was to stop threatening people and be satisfied with what you were given.

So after all this specific advice with three different groups of people, the crowd started getting curious, and hungry for more insight. They start to wonder, with his words of wisdom and strength of conviction - is John this promised Messiah? The one who was promised to bring salvation to all people, out of great and enduring love from God, to make all things right and new? To bring the mighty down from their thrones and raise up the lowly? That the last shall be first and the first shall be last?

John recognizes this curiosity from the people and assures them, oh no, the one coming after me is even greater than I am. I will certainly baptize you with promises of God, with words of righteousness and this water of the Jordan River. But the one who comes after me, will come with fire and the Holy Spirit. He will baptize even greater than I am able to, this is the true Messiah, the promised Son of God.

And then John gets intense with his language again, talking about clearing the granary floor with a winnowing fork and burning the chaff in a great fire, separated from the wheat. We can't always choose the people and situation in which we find good news, dear friends, but that doesn't stop it from being true and good. The wheat and chaff metaphor is an extension of the many metaphors for how Jesus will bring the kingdom of God nearer. It's about making all things right and new, preserving what is good in the world, and forgiving the beloved people of God, and throwing the chaff of

sin into this fire, removing it from this world. Jesus comes with fire, John says, and this fire is not only a symbol of the Holy Spirit, but of the sin and death and fear of this world that Jesus will destroy in his ministry, death, and resurrection. The good news is still within these words, even if John is a little dramatic about it.

The uniting theme of all these directions, people, and stories, in this Gospel reading and beyond, is good news. Jesus is the good news for all people in every time and place. Jesus is the one greater than us all, the true Son of God, the promised Savior and Messiah. And what we are to do about this good, good news from God - is be good news for the people and world around us.

The question to ask, rather than just “what am I to do?” is this: how can I be good news to this person? How can I bring good news to this situation?

Good news is often situated in words of comfort, hope, and joy, which are all promised to us by the God who created us all. Sometimes good news is the word that the medical test came back clear, that something you deeply wanted is finally here, that you got the good grade or acceptance letter, the things we usually associate with good news. Good news can be as and everyday as tangible as providing a gift or items necessary for living to someone in need. Good news can be simple words of support, not always trying to fix or take away what isn't going well, but just being present with the person in need. Good news can be a hug or handshake, a text or call, some way to connect with your fellow people.

But in our humanness, even the best news that we can be and bring to others, doesn't take away all the hardship and pain and struggle of this world. Only God is truly able to create the heavenly place where death and pain and crying will be no more - but in him, we have hope for that place, that kingdom which will come nearer. Sometimes good news is simply telling the truth, and being both honest and kind in your dealings with others. Jesus is our way, our truth, and our life, and though the truth may not always feel like good news, in Jesus, we have hope for whatever that

truth may bring. We are better able to truly be present in our life when we are starting from a place of honesty and truth, not hiding the discomfort of the world, but rather facing it with the sure hope and faith that God is with us in it. God is always with us, no matter what hardship or truth prevents us from feeling like there's good news in the world. Jesus is the good news, for us and with us in every situation and with every person, thanks be to God. In Jesus we have the strength to carry on and in time continue to be good news for the world around us.

So friends, I encourage you to look around for good news in your life and in the world. See the ways that God works, not always in ways that we expect or are perfect or according to the script or expectation we may lay out, but in ways that are still very good. Remember that God created this world and has called it good from the very beginning, and that goodness is still here and woven into the very fibers of our reality. Even the weirdest, most unlikely people around us are worthy of the good news, and can be the ones to give us good news too. I pray that your hearts will be open in love for these neighbors, that you will feel the call to serve and bring forth that goodness of God for all people. May you be comforted by the good news of Jesus, present with us now, and soon to be born for the sake of all people. Jesus is our good news, always. Thanks be to God, Amen.