



Dec. 16, 2018 Luke 3: 7-18 & Zeph. 3: 14-18

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Stone, Naomi. [The Grace of Kindness](#)

[Monastery Sunday Homilies](#)

ENTERING THE SCENE:

What ought we to do? It is interesting that only Luke includes this question in his gospel. This is the ancient question that confronts us again as we enter into this third week of preparing the way of the Lord. John asks us to look inside and discover the ways we can offer help to others in need or use our position or knowledge to ease others burdens. Pope Francis gives us a role model for how to answer the questions of our own day and time. It will be unique to each of us just as it was in John's day. Take some time this week to find your own answer to "what should I do"?

LK 3: 7-18 (Verses in italics in Revised Common Lectionary)

7 He would say to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him: "You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Give some evidence that you mean to reform. Do not begin by saying to yourselves, 'Abraham is our father.' I tell you, God can raise up children

to Abraham from these stones. 9 Even now the ax is laid to the root of the tree. Every tree that is not fruitful will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

10 The crowds asked John, "What ought we to do?" 11 In reply he said, "Let the man with two coats give to him who has none. The man who has food should do the same." 12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what are we to do?" 13 He answered them, "Exact nothing over and above your fixed amount." 14 Soldiers likewise asked him, "What about us?" He told them, "Do not bully anyone. Denounce no one falsely. Be content with your pay." 15 The people were full of anticipation, wondering in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all by saying: "I am baptizing you in water, but there is one to come who is mightier than I. I am not fit to loosen his sandal strap. He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire. 17 His winnowing-fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire." 18 Using exhortations of this sort, he preached the good news to the people.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: The people ask John what they must do. He gives them concrete ways to change their responses to life's challenges. What ways am I making changes so as to be ready to receive God's unconditional love?

PRAYER: The good news of this week is that God is breaking into my world in a new way to reveal God's very self. The people in John's day ask what they must do to prepare, and I ask now what I must do to also prepare for God's coming into my life in a deeper way this Advent. Help me cut down everything that is not fruitful in my life and use the dead wood to fuel the fire of my love. Amen.

WORD STUDY AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

VIPERS / TREE / AX / CUT DOWN: All these images recall the episode in the Garden of Eden.

Do you think Luke wants me to consider that the old order's power is over?

FLEE/ REFORM: When confronted with a challenge we have the choice to flee or face the issue.

Remember the last time I chose to flee rather than reform. How did it work out?

ABRAHAM IS OUR FATHER: John is not going to let the old "Abraham is our Father" stuff let them off the hook. He himself has already cut himself off from that system by turning his back on his duty to succeed his father Zechariah as priest and to continue the priestly line by marriage and progeny.

Do I have any ideas in my faith life that has outlived its usefulness like this one? If so, why do I keep it? Can this help me identify where my growth in faith lies?

JOHN: John was Jesus' cousin and was three months older than Jesus. John also shares the experience of the wilderness and his total dependence on God for his needs. All John knows for sure is that he ISN'T the Messiah.

If I were one of those asking questions, what question would I have for John? What do I think made it possible for those people to believe John's message? What does it mean today to depend totally on God?

UGHT: Here we have two of the most despised types of people, tax collectors and soldiers, are asking John what they ought to do. This implies a readiness and willingness to hear what his response will be.

What do I think John would reply to me if I asked him what I ought to do to prepare for the way of the Lord? What am I ready, able and willing to do?

COATS/FOOD: Often the poor only had the clothes on their backs and enough food for the day, so a person with two coats or extra food would have been considered wealthy. John is telling them, they are to give to the one in need.

What do I now have that could be that extra "coat/food"? When I encounter someone without the basic necessities, what is my response to this need?

TAX COLLECTORS: Rome, and the temple, both exacted heavy taxation on the people. A person could bid for the job. Anything the collector received above and beyond the stipulated amount, the collector could keep, often grinding the people into poverty in the process. The people saw them as traitors, and they were universally despised.

In this system, your money was shipped off to some foreign oppressor, and the collector lived in abundance while I struggled to keep alive. How would I feel if my neighbor (the tax collector) did that to me? What would I think if he had a change of heart and took John's words seriously? (See Lk 19:8f.).

BAPTIZED: John was preaching a baptism of repentance. This ritual signified a change of mind and heart that was to usher in a new way of being in the world.

Each Advent we take time to prepare for the Incarnation. What ways have I 'died' to an old way of being, so as to be ready for the great event of God coming to be with me?

EXACT: The word, exact, means to demand, compel, or to get by authority or force

Try to imagine the surprise when the person I despise, changes, and now I have to relate to them in a new way. Does something in me have to change as well?

SOLDIERS: The soldiers, like the tax collectors, were seen as traitors and oppressors of their own people. However, John did not ask either the tax collectors or the soldiers to quit their jobs, but to be fair and kind.

If I were a soldier or a tax collector, how do I think I might feel about John's response? How do I think that this change could affect my relationships with my neighbors?

BULLY: A bully often gets their own way with force, yelling, and intimidation. John knew that the conditions could be 'humanized' if both these groups worked with their own people instead of against them.

If I am in a 'one down' position, how do I find a solution that can allow both parties to come out ahead if they want to?

DENOUNCE FALSELY: To denounce is to inform against someone or something. The power a soldier had to ruin a life was enormous. John is asking them to always use their power honestly and fairly.

Think of the times when I abused my power. Did it really help or hurt my sense of self? Think of the times that I resisted misusing my power or influence. How did that feel?

CONTENT: To be content is to be at peace with yourself. John was asking the soldiers to be content with their pay and not be using their office to oppress others.

Are there any things in my life today that rob me of contentment? Is there anything I can do about them without being untrue to myself? Will that cause me to make an adjustment in my expectations?

ANTICIPATION: Anticipation can be dreadful or exciting, or both. Now that God is once again giving the people a prophet in John, the hopes that the 'Messiah' was near and was even present in John himself.

Try to imagine the excitement that hearing John's message might have caused. Have I ever lived on 'tiptoe' waiting for something? How did it feel?

MESSIAH: The Samaritans thought the Messiah was the one to bring all truth. The Jews thought the Messiah would lead them out of servitude to Rome and to autonomy. The Qumran community thought there would be two Messiahs, one to take care of religious concerns and another to take care of political issues.

If I were listening to John that day, which of these definitions do I think I would have chosen?



WATER: Water, in the rite of baptism, signifies a dying to an old way of being, and a rising to a new way of being in the world.

John used the medium of water for his baptism. If I had been there that day, would I have gone into the water to be baptized? If so, why? If not, why?

MIGHTIER: John was impressive, both in his message and in his person. He fit the image of someone who could organize and lead the people to their freedom.

When the people went home that day after listening to John, what image do I think they might have had of the one who was coming? Might that image have gotten in the way when they encountered Jesus? Why?

LOOSEN SANDAL STRAPS: This was a task of the lowest slave in the service of a master.

Would this have added still more power to the image that people would have gotten from John's preaching? How does that compare with what people experienced when they walked and talked with Jesus?

HOLY SPIRIT: In the Hebrew Scriptures there was a concept of the holiness of God's spirit, but until Pentecost, the people would not have experienced it personally.

What do you think the people listening to John that day imagined the Holy Spirit was? How do I define this reality today?

FIRE: Fire consumes, purifies, refines, changes one thing into another, and is a form of energy.

Compare a baptism of water with a baptism that has both water and fire. What does adding fire add to the experience?

WINNOWING FAN: A winnowing fan was a tool used to toss grain up into the air so that the wind could separate the grain from the chaff.

What tosses me into the wind and helps separate that which is worthy of saving from that which can be discarded? Have some experiences been a 'winnowing fan' for me?

THRESHING FLOOR: The threshing floor was the place where grain was winnowed. It was a smooth hard surface that supported this energetic work.

What have been my threshing floors'? Who or what did the threshing for me?

WHEAT: Wheat is one of the essential foods for our health and well-being.

What about this scripture is essential for my spiritual health and well-being?

GRANARY: A granary is a place to store the harvested wheat. It keeps it safe from the elements and allows us to have a supply of grain close at hand.

Can the words of scripture be a sort of granary for me? Can the study of scripture be a form of harvesting that, which can nourish my spirit?

CHAFF: The chaff enclosed the developing wheat during its growing process. It is essential for the healthy development of the forming food and seed source. It is only discarded once its purpose is achieved.

What ideas or habits do I have, that were useful during my development? Are there any that might now need to be 'thrown up in the air with a winnowing fan,' in order for the more maturely developed idea, or new habit to be available to me?

UNQUENCHABLE FIRE: An unquenchable fire is a burning that cannot be put out. This is the place that you can throw all those chaff- like ideas or habits to be free of them.

What chaff am I throwing into the fire this Advent?

EXHORTATIONS: An exhortation is an urgent plea for a response.

What is calling me to respond this Advent in order for me to more fully receive God in the Incarnation of Jesus?

GOOD NEWS: The Gospel is literally the "good news". This is what the word means.

What is good news for me in this Gospel today?

PARALLEL TEXTS: Lk. 3:10f // Acts 2:37; James 2:15; 1 Jn. 3:17; Lk. 3:15-18 // Mt. 3:11f; Mk. 1:7f; Acts 13:25; Lk. 3: 16 // Jn. 1:27; Acts 1:5; 11:16; Lk. 3:17 // Mt. 3:12;

OTHER TEXTS OF THE WEEK: Zeph. 3: 14-18; Is. 12: 2-6; Phil. 4: 4-7; Lk. 3: 10-18;

Revised Common Lectionary: Zeph. 3:14-20; Is. 12: 2-6; Phil. 4: 4-7; Lk. 3:7-18;

SUPPORTIVE INFORMATION:

Lk. 3.7–18: John’s teaching. 7: Crowds, Mt 3.7–10 addresses John’s invective to Pharisees and Sadducees. Brood of vipers, Matthew’s designation for Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees (Mt 3.7; 12.34; 23.33). Wrath to come, God’s final judgment. 8: Abraham as . . . ancestor (see Jn 8.33–39), Jewish tradition speaks of “zukhut ’avot,” the “merits of the fathers” (see e.g., b. Shabb. 55a). See also 1.72n. Stones . . . children, an Aramaic (“avnayya . . . benayya”) and Hebrew (“avanim . . . banim”) pun. 11: Share, care for the disadvantaged is a major Jewish value (see, e.g., Isa 1.10–20; 58.6–7; Ezek 18.5–9; Tob 1.16–17; 4.16; Gen. Rab. 30; b. Ber. 5a; etc.). 12: Tax collectors, most likely Jews in Rome’s employ, regarded as traitors and known for corrupt practices. 14: Soldiers, including Jews in service to Herod Antipas (see Ant. 18.5.1). The teaching conforms to Josephus’s description of John (Ant. 18.117), “A good man who commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another and piety towards God.” 15: Some regarded John as the Messiah. 16–18: (Mt 3.11–12; Mk 1.7–8). Holy Spirit, see 1.15n., Acts 2.1–4. 18: Good news, 1.19n. Pgs. 103-4. [The Jewish Annotated New Testament](#)

Comparing Luke’s version of verses 7-18 we find significant differences. Matthew has John calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers whereas Luke talks to the multitudes which points us to Luke’s emphasis on inclusion of interested Gentiles. Mark skips this episode altogether. Only Luke includes vs 10-14 which asks the question of what are people to do. Compare Mt. 3: 11-12 and Mk. 1: 7-8 with Luke 3: 15-18. Mark excludes the winnowing fan and fire sayings as Jerusalem had not been destroyed as yet when he wrote. See Gospel Parallels pgs. 9-10.

Tax collectors collaborated with Rome by helping to fund the very soldiers that pressed down on the people. It would be hard to imagine two more hated groups of people in John’s day. Later on after the temple’s destruction, the tax that used to be used to support the temple and poor was diverted to building pagan temples. The people subject to being taxed also increased to women and children. It was called the *fiscus Judaicus*. Pagan images were impressed on the coins needed to pay the taxes further enraging the people.

How do we wait for God? We wait with patience. But patience does not mean passivity. Waiting patiently is not like waiting for the bus to come, the rain to stop, or the sun to rise. It is an active waiting in which we live the present moment to the full in order to find there the signs of the One we are waiting for. The word patience comes from the Latin verb *patior* which means “to suffer.” Waiting patiently is suffering through the present moment, tasting it to the full, and letting the seeds that are sown in the ground on which we stand grow into strong plants. Waiting patiently always means paying attention to what is happening right before our eyes and seeing there the first rays of God’s glorious coming. Henri Nouwen

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Luke 3:17)



John the Baptist’s metaphor of a threshing floor would have been a very familiar image to the rural farmers and day-laborers of Judea. The first step in the threshing process was to spread out the newly harvested wheat on the ground. The grain was then broken apart from the straw and the chaff by driving a wooden sled pulled by an ox or donkey over the stalks. Sharp stones or iron teeth on the bottom of the sled, pressed down by the weight of the driver who rode on it, cut the stalks and broke open the husks. Using a fork, workers tossed the wheat into the air; the light, useless husks were blown away, but the heavier grains fell back to the ground, where they could be collected for food.

(A Roman portrait bust said to be of Josephus[1]Josephus (AD 37 – c. 100), also known as



Yosef Ben Matityahu (Joseph, son of Matthias) and, after he became a Roman citizen, as Titus Flavius Josephus, was a first-century Jewish historian and apologist of priestly and royal ancestry who survived and recorded the destruction of Jerusalem in ad 70 . His works give an important insight into first-century Judaism. Josephus was an important apologist in the Roman world for the Jewish people and culture, particularly at a time of conflict and tension. He always remained, in his own eyes, a loyal and law-observant Jew. He went out of his way both to commend Judaism to educated Gentiles, and to insist on its compatibility with cultured Graeco-Roman thought. He constantly contended for the antiquity of Jewish culture, presenting its people as civilized, devout and philosophical. Eusebius reports that a statue of Josephus was erected in Rome.

Josephus’s two most important works are *The Jewish War* (c. 75) and *Antiquities of the Jews* (c. 94). *The Jewish War* recounts the Jewish revolt against Rome (66–70). *Antiquities of the Jews* recounts the history of the world from a Jewish perspective. These works provide valuable insight into first century Judaism and the background of early Christianity.

Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely and be content with your wages. [Josephus](#) *Antiquities* xviii. 116-19

Josephus's reference to the Baptist arises almost casually out of his account of the affairs of Herod Antipas. Some of the Jews thought that Herod's army had been destroyed by God as a just punishment for his treatment of John called the Baptist. Herod killed him, though he was a good man and commanded the Jews to practice virtue, by exercising justice towards one another and piety towards God, and to come together to baptism. For the baptism would be acceptable to God if they used it, not for the putting away of certain sins, but for the purification of the body, the soul having previously been cleansed by righteousness. Now when the rest crowded together to him (for they were greatly moved by hearing his words) Herod was afraid lest John's great influence over the people might lead to a revolt; for they seemed ready to do anything he advised. He therefore thought it much the better course to anticipate any rebellion that might arise from him by destroying him, than be involved in difficulties through an actual revolution and then regret it.

In about 525 A.D., [Dionysius Exiguus](#) (Dennis the Little), a Scythian monk, who hopes to repair a division in the church over the dates of Easter, prepared a new calendar. He decided to begin with Jesus' birth. He used a Roman system based on the establishment of Rome, which put Jesus' birth at 12/25/753 A.U. C. (*Ab Urbe Condita*). Tiberius' reign began about 767 A.U. C., or 14 A. D. or 754 A.U.C became 1 A. D. Charlemagne made this method nearly universal in the 9th C, and Pope Gregory made a few adjustments in 1582. But Dionysius had made a mistake if Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great. Josephus tells us Herod died in 4 B.C. It is commonly assumed that the day of December 25th was chosen to supercede the old Roman festival of Saturnalia which was celebrated on that same day.

The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. - Martin Luther King Jr.

Preaching that perturbs

A preaching that does not point out sin / is not the preaching of the gospel.

A preaching that makes sinners feel good,

so that they become entrenched in their sinful state,

betrays the gospel's call. / A preaching that awakens, / a preaching that enlightens -/ as when a light turned on awakens and of course annoys a sleeper -/ that is the preaching of Christ, calling: Wake up! Be converted!

- **Oscar Romero** Source: *The Violence of Love*, by Oscar Romero

This is not usually the result of ill will on anybody's part; it's just that you can lead people only as far as you yourself have gone. Transformed people transform people. When they talk so glibly about what is always Mystery, it's clear that many clergy have never enjoyed the third heaven themselves, and they cannot teach what they do not know. Theological training without spiritual experience is deadly. As Pope Francis says, such preaching bores "the one who is doing it and also the one who has to listen to it." Richard Rohr

If we live and love the way the Gospel invites us to, we will intrigue people. Respect and cherish your spouse and children, and people will be intrigued. Work hard and pay attention to the details of your work, and you will intrigue people. God out of your way to help those in need, people will be intrigued. When we do what is right even if it comes at a great cost to ourselves, people are intrigued. Patience, kindness, humility, gratitude, thoughtfulness, generosity, courage and forgiveness are all intriguing. Pg. 23. Kelly, Matthew. Rediscover Catholicism.. Beacon Pub. 2010

...a preacher is called to experience life to such a depth that the meteorologist, the storekeeper, the farmer, and the laborer will all one day or another realize that he is touching places where their own lives also really vibrate, and in this way he allows them to become free to let the Word of God do its redemptive work. Pg. 38.

Nowen, Henri. Adam: God's Beloved. Maryknoll, NY. Orbis Books, 1997.

Do your job or everyday duty with the greatest possible perfection, that is, with concentration, naturalness and pleasure. Avoid all tension, haste and disgust. Find in your work the strength and joy of an ideal, 'Age quod agis,' 'Do what you're doing.'

...a preacher is called to experience life to such a depth that the meteorologist, the storekeeper, the farmer, and the laborer will all one day or another realize that he is touching places where their own lives also really vibrate, and in this way he allows them to become free to let the Word of God do its redemptive work. Pg. 38. Nowen, Henri. Adam: God's Beloved. Maryknoll, NY. Orbis Books, 1997.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Beck, Robert. Sunday Homilies: Cycle C 2012.. Pg. 12-15.

Beck, Robert. Sunday Homilies: Cycle B 2007. Pg. 10-12.

White, William R. *Stories For the Journey*. Minneapolis, MN. Augsburg Pub. House. 1988. **THE RABBI'S GIFT**: Pages 109-10.

Weems, Ann. [Kneeling in Bethlehem](#). Philadelphia. Westminster Press. 1980. **THE COMING OF GOD**: Pg. 13. **IN DECEMBER DARKNESS**: Page 15.