



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

13025 Bell Air Drive, Auburn, CA 95603 (530) 823-3916 apc@auburnpresbyterian.org

“Justice Is Mercy” Luke 3:7-18 Healing Ministry

This has been quite a week. I spent about 14 hours polishing my Doctor of Ministry thesis, and have sent it in to my editor, whom I'll pay to put on the last touches, print it, and take it to Fuller Seminary for binding. I've sent the Seminary the money to cover binding costs. Now all I have to pay are my graduation fees, and I can walk across the platform in Pasadena Saturday, June 12, and the faculty will officially “confer on me” the Doctor of Ministry degree. I am done! Whew! So now this Christmas can be a little brighter for me. I wanted you to know. As soon as a bound copy is in my hands, we can put it in the Church Library.

But a doctoral thesis can be a pretty esoteric Christmas present. For little kids, this year's must-have toy is the Zhu Zhu Toy Hamster, of which there are several characters, each with a distinct personality. They have names like Mr. Squiggles, Num Nums, Chuck, etc. Each little electronic gizmo has a nurturing mode and an adventure mode, and there are all kinds of hamster accessories to go with them—a hamster surfboard, a little car and garage, and of course, a hamster wheel. And these little guys are flying off store shelves. Wal-Mart Online has already run out of several of the characters. Is this what Christmas is about?

Well, what IS Christmas about, anyway? When we clear away the traditions that have accumulated over 20 centuries, what do we discover?

Our text today comes from Luke's gospel again, and again it puts the spotlight on the adult John the Baptist who is about to introduce the adult Jesus of Nazareth. Isn't that “rushing things”? We haven't even had Christmas, and suddenly we're focusing on John and Jesus *as adults*?

Yes, it is rushing things, but for a very good reason. How we celebrate Christmas depends significantly on what kind of baby, what kind of man, is being born of Mary and adopted by Joseph. Who will this child grow up to be? What is God doing through putting off His divinity and becoming human in the baby Jesus of Nazareth? If it's just any little baby we welcome into the world, then little coo's and ooh's and aaah's would be appropriate. But if God is in this ordinary birth, and if God is coming to be with us, then wouldn't we celebrate differently?

So let's read another piece of Luke's account of John's message and ministry, to learn just Who is coming, and what that means. Our text is Luke 3, 7-18. Listen for the Voice of God through this portion of God's Word. *[text]*

This preacher was *on fire!* This is his famous “fire sermon”, warning people that changes have to be made.

John is out by the Jordan River, baptizing people who are ready to turn away from sin and turn to God. He has a few disciples who follow around with him, but John is not trying to start a movement; he is simply clearing the way (as we learned last week) for the Savior, the Lord. His mission is to prepare people.

Now, in the middle of his sermon, more crowds come out from Jerusalem to—what, spy on a religious deviant? See a show? Or be baptized so they can say they’re “in”? John will have no hollow repentance. God’s mercy does not come cheap--this is no casual public washing of the skin.

John sees among these latecomers some people that would make him suspicious. Perhaps some were Pharisees. The word, “Pharisee” means, “separated”. They were the Puritans of their day, seeking a pious and pure life not only for themselves, but for the nation, which was living in a very difficult time under Roman oppression. John does not trust them—*sack of snakes*, he calls them. You see, repentance is not just saying “I’m sorry”, even in public; it’s living a changed life. If you are on God’s side, *show me*, he says. Show the fruit, the changed lives. And don’t even think about saying, “This does not apply to us, because we’re natural-born Jewish children of Abraham the Patriarch.” Hey—God can make children of Abraham out of the stones you’re walking on; there is no value in lineage if your living isn’t godly.

And the time is short, John says. The woodcutter has his ax sharpened, and he’s standing over the roots of you fruitless trees; he’s about to cut them off, and make them fall with a great crash. Then they go into the fire, too. Wake up!

Well, the crowd is stunned. Scared. Agitated. “What do we need to do?” they ask. And this introduces the heart of what I think is aimed at us today.

Let’s start with the Roman soldiers who were there to make sure this public gathering was not the start of trouble. Somehow, John’s message had even gotten to them! What about us, they ask. What should we do?

“Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay,” John said. Hmm. John must have been well-acquainted with the behavior of the foreign troops occupying Israel. The Roman army was the world’s most efficient killing machine at the time. They were feared and hated; and if soldiers were threatening people for money—shaking them down, or putting them in prison without charge—who was going to challenge them? Aside from the offensiveness and constant reminder of defeat the Romans represented, there was this constant, personal threat. Fear and hatred. And often it got ugly.

Some tax collectors also asked, what about us? It was commonly known that tax collectors were extortionists under protection of those same Roman soldiers. Let me explain. Tax collectors were local Jewish men who worked for the Romans. The Roman taxes—which were quite high--supported those same Roman occupation troops and the Roman Emperor beyond. That would be enough right there to make the citizenry hate their tax collectors. But there was more. In appointing someone to be a tax collector, the Romans were giving that person a great deal of power. The tax collector kept records of people’s payments. If the tax collector wanted, he could just not write down that someone’s tax was paid. And then some soldiers might pay the citizen a visit, to “encourage” him and all his neighbors, to keep their taxes current. To prevent such a visit, the tax collector could suggest the citizen add a little to his tax payment, to be sure the official made the record accurate. That’s the extortion, for all the extra money went into the tax collector’s own pocket. Sometimes people who wanted to be tax collectors would pay what amounted to a bribe to the authorities, in hopes of getting rich like this. To the tax collectors, John said, “Don’t collect any more than you are required to.”

Now so far, what John is telling these people to do sounds right and just. But the first of the questions to him comes from “the crowd”. That could be anyone, though probably not soldiers or tax collectors. This could be ordinary folks, religious or not, who might have come out to see John for any number of reasons. John’s message to them was very specific, also: “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”

Now, this is not “justice”, as we think of it. Leaving innocent people alone, not molesting them or threatening them—that seems like justice, to us. Why is John so focused on re-distributing income? If I don’t owe time or money by state coercion, I have no other obligation.

Our problem is, we don’t understand—maybe we don’t want to—what the Bible means when it says, “justice”. In our English common law roots, we think of justice mostly in terms of personal property—ownership. We may not damage another’s property, or we have to restore it and perhaps be punished in addition. But the Bible includes social welfare in its concept of justice. Justice means, “just enough to get by”, according to the Bible, and it is the right of everyone who is a citizen, or a foreigner, a faithful woman or a secular man, a good person or a crook, an active giver or a marginalized invalid. Justice means, giving up clothes you don’t need to people who do need them. Justice means, no one goes hungry. And either as individuals or churches, or delegated to the state (as in Israel or in Calvinist Geneva Switzerland in the Reformation), it is the job of God’ people to make sure people get what they need to live. It’s amazing to me so many Christians are on the one hand fighting to maintain a legacy for our country as “a Christian nation”, but then are against the State helping people get by. Those folks don’t seem to know their Bible very well, it seems to me.

This Biblical idea of “justice” is a HUGE shift for us. Let that roll around in your head and heart for a moment. Doesn’t the magnitude of that seem impossible? Wouldn’t we also be asking John to break this down for us, to tell us where we might start?

Well, got an extra winter coat? I do. I have several. Hmm. Now, what?

John is telling us, our Boss is coming for an inspection tour of His workshop. And this is supposed to be “good news”, the text says. How is this “good news”? This is good news, because it’s a warning that drives us to action.

If you were on vacation by the ocean, and you and your family were standing on some land looking down on the beach and the waves, wouldn’t you like to know that six people had died last year on that same bluff when it gave way underneath them, and that you’d missed the warning poster while you were taking pictures with your I-Phone? Such a fact from someone standing nearby would be perhaps frightening, but it would be good news, because you could do something to save your life.

Christmas is coming, the birth of God-come-to-us. If God’s agenda is what John is telling us—and a run through the Old Testament confirms it is--wouldn’t we work harder at that, individually and together, and be very thankful someone tipped us off about The Boss being on His way? Because to be “fired” from this assignment in God’s World Workshop is to be “fired” in hell. That’s what John is telling us.

Thank God that he sent Jesus. Jesus was not out to bring us to God through fear—though he did use stern language to wake people up and to confront religious hypocrisy that separated faith from life. Jesus invited people to join him in the “with God life”, what he called “The Kingdom of God”. And Kingdom living is an exact replica, a fulfillment, of what God had been asking us from Genesis, on.

Yes, we ARE our brother’s and sister’s keeper, contrary to what our ancestor Cain implied in Genesis 4:9. Cain’s sin was his self-centeredness—his not loving his own brother (let alone a neighbor) as he loved himself. Living the Jesus Life, Kingdom living, is loving God with all ya got, and loving your neighbor as yourself--discipling each other toward full-filled Christian living.

THIS is the kind of Savior that is coming again—the Boss of All, beginning with Christians who have said we believe it. This is the kind of Savior who came to us as a helpless infant, a suffering servant, a crucified Lord, to woo us toward eternal life in love.

The Advent candle today was on the theme of “peace”. The late Pope John Paul VI put the Bible’s advice in a nice nutshell: “If you want peace, work for justice.” God’s justice. So people have what they need to live.

Without this, it’s just “happy holidays”. With God’s justice, it’s “Merry Christmas”.

Healing ministry intro

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on December 13, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]