

"Sing Aloud and Shout!"
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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Zephaniah 3: 14 - 20

- ¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel!
 Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!
- ¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies.
 The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.
- ¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
 Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.
- ¹⁷ The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory;
 he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love;
 he will exult over you with loud singing
- ¹⁸ as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you,
 so that you will not bear reproach for it.
- ¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors at that time.
 And I will save the lame and gather the outcast,
 and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.
- ²⁰ At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you;
 for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth,
 when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.

Luke 3:7-18

- ⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."
- ¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."
- ¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His 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."
- ¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Last week, we talked about the difference between being and doing- the pressures to prove our worth through what we do, when what we are really measured by is who we are, how God's love flows through us.

John the Baptist understood that. He was completely unworried about anyone, or anything other than sharing the Good News that Jesus was coming.

John the Baptist. To one who prepared the way, the one who teaches us about how to prepare for Jesus.

John the Baptist, who lived in the desert, wore very little clothing and ate only locusts and honey. He wasn't an exaggerated figure, he was the real deal. When he preached, he shouted his heart out (or maybe I should say out of his heart), passionately telling people that Jesus was coming and that they needed to turn their lives around. He even called his congregation a bunch of underhanded snakes whose claims of faith meant nothing without the fruits to show for it.

But unlike most churches where that would likely mean that the preacher would be staring at empty pews, they flocked to hear him. To be baptized by him. To turn their lives around.

Who was John the Baptist?

John the Baptist was the child of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the cousin of Jesus' mother, Mary. Elizabeth and Zechariah were older and had no children, and they desperately wanted children. John was the child they yearned for.

There is a quote from Kalil Gibran that reads: Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you. It is a nice quote, but it was what Elizabeth and Zachariah had to really live. For what did their son do? He lived in the desert. He didn't eat well. He wore terrible clothes. What must that have done to the mother who no doubt longed to cook for him and the father who was a priest to have his son call faithful people a brood of vipers?

John the Baptist had a difficult row to hoe. He didn't have the luxury of thinking about the long term and helping people to see the truth little by little, his job was to get people ready for Jesus and Jesus was on his way. There was no extra time. When John the Baptist started, he didn't know what Jesus was going to be like. He didn't know when he would meet Jesus, he only knew that the world needed to get ready. He had faith, and that was enough.

Then Jesus came along. And John Baptized him. But even then, John didn't see that as his cue to retire, he kept going, telling people about Jesus. Telling the truth about what people were doing wrong. Eventually, it would get him killed. Herod had committed this little sin of marrying his brother's wife, and John had told him, upfront and loudly, that he was wrong. Well, the king didn't like being told he was wrong and the Queen, his former sister in law, liked it even less, and so they plotted and schemed until they found a way to have John the Baptist beheaded, which is exactly what happened to John the Baptist. When we say John the Baptist lost his head in the end, it isn't a euphemism.

John the Baptist, pulled no punches, suffered no fools, who turned no one away- he would baptize the faithful, the tax collectors, the soldiers- as long as they repented, and who never stopped trying.

His words were not easy. They spoke truth. Hard truth.
But they were also words of hope. Words of possibility.

Look how Luke concludes: “he proclaimed the good news to the people.”
And he’s telling **us** to prepare for Jesus, only it’s not the preparation we normally think about. It’s not packing the pantry, or setting the table, it’s letting go.

**Preparing to welcome Jesus isn’t about more, John the Baptist tells us,
It’s about less. Literally.**

“And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’”
(Luke 3:10-11)

Welcoming Jesus can be less by half. And sometimes we are led by children. In her book “Small Things with Great Love,” author and speaker Margot Starbuck (who will be leading the spring women’s retreat here at Old Stone) tells the story of the Salwen family. She writes:

In a fancy schmancy house in Atlanta, the Salwen family was living the American Dream... [until several years ago when] fourteen-year-old Hannah and her father slowed to a stop at a red light, Hannah saw a homeless man on her right and a Mercedes on her left. Recognizing the blatant discrepancy, Hannah explains, “I looked at the guy in the Mercedes and said, “You know, if that guy didn’t have such a nice car, the man over here could have a meal.”

That’s the kind of naïve way that children think, isn’t it?

Hannah’s father replied, “What if we didn’t have such a nice car?”

Those were the opening lines in a family dialogue that led the Salwen family to engage in a pretty nutty experiment. In *The Power of Half*, Kevin and Hannah Salwen describe their family’s decision to sell the fancy house and move into a small home that cost half as much. Having researched various charitable organizations, they took half the money from the sale of their home and invested it in initiatives to end hunger and poverty.

Hannah’s younger brother explains, “We’re showing that you can redefine the American Dream to mean that sharing can lead to a better life for others.”

The Salwen family gets it. Taking their lead from, a child—granted, one with a pretty alert and pliable parent—they were willing to recognize how much influence they really did have and courageous enough to use it.¹

Sometimes listening to John the Baptist on how to prepare for Jesus is literally cutting our possessions in half.

But maybe, sometimes, it’s doubling them. This time, a lesson taught by a grandmother, Presbyterian pastor Austin Crenshaw Shelley’s grandmother.

¹ Margot Starbuck, “Small Things with Great Love: Adventures in Loving Your Neighbor.” (Downers Grove :IVP Press, 2011) pages 164-165.

She writes:²

My grandfather never questioned the grocery bill. All other expenditures fell subject to his review, but the grocery shopping belonged entirely within my grandmother's domain. Papa had good reason to be frugal. Though we never went hungry, we lived on relatively little inside our 526-square-foot home in rural South Carolina....

As far as I know, Papa never discovered the secret my grandmother and I shared. Every Saturday she and I whisked into town..... As I pushed our cart up and down the aisles of the Red & White, she carefully selected food in duplicate—two boxes of cereal, two jars of peanut butter, two bags of flour—until our cart looked like an abstract rendering of Noah's ark with its produce and nonperishable food items arranged two by two.

Then we'd check out (an achingly slow process involving a hefty stack of coupons), load the car with heavy paper grocery bags, and drive straight to the town's food bank, where my grandmother would donate exactly half of everything she'd just purchased. She bought my silence each week with a small candy bar, which was not immune to her rule: one chocolate treat for me, one for the food bank.

On one of these grocery trips when I was eight or nine years old, I asked my grandmother for a name-brand cereal I'd seen on a television commercial. "We can't afford that one," she replied without looking up from her list. "We can if we don't buy two of them," I grumbled under my breath. My grandmother's eyes met mine. She put her list down so as to place her hands firmly on my shoulders. She measured her words as carefully as my grandfather had measured the dollars for our Sunday offering: "If we can't afford two, we can't afford one."

If we can't afford two, we can't afford one.

What if we applied this principle not only to our possessions, our shopping?

What if, in order to be ready to welcome Jesus,

we cut in half our grudges and our bitterness? Our certainty and our fear?

What if we doubled, instead, our gratitude and trust, our mercy and belief in abundance?

How might we be ready to welcome Jesus then?

With our halves and our doubles, maybe that's exactly what John had in mind when he told the people what Isaiah had said.

*Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;*

So said Isaiah, so said John the Baptist, so says God.

Prepare the way of the Lord.

So let us do the less, or the more, that is required.

Amen. Amen.

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/december-16-advent-3c-luke-37-18>