**What Should I Give Him?**

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Texts: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18

So maybe this isn’t our go-to passage for the inspirational verse for our annual Christmas card. “You brood of vipers” just doesn’t have the right Christmas ring to it, you know. And, honestly, it is highly unlikely that this would be our response if you showed up in the church office this week inquiring about baptism. Thank goodness.

But John, in our scripture, is frustrated. Crowds of people are clamoring for the baptism he’s offering…this baptism of repentance. They don’t, in his opinion, understand what they are signing up for. They seem to think it’s just a ritual, some churchy thing that we do on a Saturday morning. But doesn’t really change anything since, after all, they are already the chosen people, the children of Abraham.

John protests. This baptism is more than that. You have to come really ready…to reset intentions to truly live like the chosen people of God. To repent from the ways of the world that do harm, that keep our human siblings from experiencing the abundance of God, that perpetuate war, poverty, and all the -isms that separate us one from another. To say yes to what God is asking of us.

He wants the people’s actions and their words to match. He believes that what we really believe to be true necessarily shows up in our day-to-day living. He knows that the crowd’s identity as children of Abraham, of people of the Jewish faith, and our identity as Christians, are evident in the way they, and we, live in the world every day. Attendance to the rituals of the Sabbath, or to Sunday worship, don’t check a box that means we can ignore our faith for the other six days. We take the church with us, tiny branches of the body of Christ, every place we go all week long.

To be clear, that does not mean that we should force others to practice our faith, but rather that we seek to be Christ-like in the midst of a world that has a diversity of opinions and often runs according to rules at odds with those taught in synagogues, mosques, temples, and churches everywhere. It means that they will know we are Christians by our love, as the familiar song proclaims, because faith predicts our behavior, and our behavior speaks volumes about our true faith.

The baptism that John shares is one that requires something of the baptized. It requires us to align ourselves fully with God and God’s work in the world. To say yes to God’s yes means we turn our eyes and our hearts to God even when the world tries to reward us for doing it a different way.

The people are shocked. “What, then, should we do?” they ask.

John’s rules are surprisingly simple. Unlike his cousin Jesus, who so often speaks in parables, John’s rules are straightforward.

Reading them reminds me of the kindergarten rules Robert Fulghum lays out in his essay, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. “Share everything. Play fair…Don’t take things that aren’t yours.”[[1]](#footnote-1) These are elemental rules that lay out how we live together in just ways.

To the crowd, John says, “share.”

If you have more than you need, give the extra away to someone who needs it. You don’t need to give away so much that you don’t have enough – that’s not sharing…that’s sacrifice and maybe there’s a place for that, but that’s not what John is teaching here. To share means that I will have what I need and so will you. If I have two coats, I keep one and give the other away to a person starting out again after a time at Middle River. If I have extra food, I keep enough for myself and give the extra to a kid at Shelburne who didn’t get to eat dinner. If I have extra time, I use it to run an errand for the family struggling in the aftermath of the death of a loved one. If I have a home in my church, I intentionally invite and offer hospitality to one who couldn’t even imagine they’d be welcome. I don’t have to give everything to you, but I don’t keep more than I need.

Might this make my life harder…probably. Extra affords luxury and comfort. We don’t have to do laundry as often. What we eat is fancier. We have more time. We don’t have to worry about being without in the future. But that coat, that meal, that time, given right now means the other person’s life is livable…sustainable. It’s not just making it easier…it’s making it possible.

So that’s the universal rule. Share. But John’s got more. He delineates between the whole group and the ones who wield power in some way. With privilege and power comes responsibility. “Don’t take things that aren’t yours,” he tells the tax collectors. And to the soldiers, he says, “Play fair.”

These soldiers and tax collectors who have come to be baptized are believers…members of the Jewish community…attendees at the synagogue…, and practitioners of the Sabbath. Faithful people who had to work in the secular Roman arena, taking jobs and doing business in a world that did not always reward honesty and generosity, that championed strength, and legalized the powerful stealing from the poor and vulnerable. John reminds them that they take their faith with them, that their behavior cannot be separated from it, and they are called to live according to the rules of much higher authority…that they are to be justice makers and safe-keepers because they have the power to do so.

We, too, are called to this. Out there is a world that favors money, power, popularity, the gathering of wealth. Nice guys don’t get ahead. Money buys happiness. Align with the most powerful.

John doesn’t tell them to pull away from the world. It’s not us versus them. We live in this world too. But God wants God’s kindom to come everywhere. So we do our best to bring justice in our little corner of it. If all the children of Abraham, our Jewish, Muslim, and Christian neighbors, numbering almost 5 billion people, actually lived out this revolutionary love right where each of us are, can you imagine what could happen?

Notice that John’s rules for life address the individual lives of the people he’s baptizing. He’s not telling them to save the world but to protect the dignity and well-being of the ones right in front of them. Don’t try to get ahead by making up stories about the people in your charge. Collect only what is fair from the ones you are collecting from. Share with those right in front of you. If you do this and everyone else does it too, it’s 5 billion spots of justice, a web of love across the whole world.

Sometimes, we see all the problems of the world, and we feel hopeless. We can’t fix it all on our own. So we freeze or walk away wringing our hands. But the hope I see in the Christmas story is that God works *through* humanity. God came into the world as a single human who was limited by time and place, but whose actions created a wave of grace and mercy that has spread across the world. The hope I see in the Advent story is that God works hand-in-hand *with* humanity. John doesn’t have all the divine power of Jesus, but he makes the place for Jesus to work within his heart, trusting God is come alongside him. And God does, insisting that human and divine work together to bring justice and peace.

John says, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful that I is coming…he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” The waters of baptism remind us, mark us, and wash us for the work of discipleship. In baptism, we say yes to God’s yes and prepare ourselves to respond to God’s grace. God has already extended the invitation, the grace. We recognize and declare we are ready to work with God, to be a catalyst for the kindom, to extend that grace through our faith and our lives everywhere we go. That’s the repentance John preaches…prepare your heart, make it ready, so God can live and work with us.

Jesus is coming and his baptism is one of Spirit and fire. It’s a fire that consumes, but doesn’t destroy – it’s the fire of the burning bush and the fire of Pentecost. When we say yes to God’s yes, we give our hearts over to God and are transformed for partnership.

Have you ever just known you had to do something? You HAD to make that phone call to a friend. You HAD to check in with a neighbor. Your whole being was restless. Your heart burned. You HAD to tell a hard truth. You HAD to give the extra you had to someone in need. Your mind could not rest. You were fired up. You HAD to say something, to advocate for someone treated unfairly. You HAD to speak to injustice by refusing to be a part of something you really wanted.

That’s the fiery baptism, melting and molding our hearts to move with the Spirit. It’s not two baptisms, but two parts of the same thing – we willing walk into that watery beginning that leads to a Spirit-filled birth process with God that, at its end, will put us in the perfected kingdom of God.

In Advent, we get to remember the beginning of the journey and prepare ourselves once more for the work of discipleship. We get to come to the water with John and take time to intentionally open our hearts, to wash away the things that keep us bogged down, to remember the grace of God who chose to live and work with us ordinary humans. We get to say yes, and yes again, to God’s yes. We get to give our heart to the one being born who knows how to love perfectly so he can kindle that love in our hearts and we can help it be seen and felt in the world right in front of us.

It’s the remembering of our holy birthday, the invitation to begin, and begin again, our life with Christ that is a birthing process that lasts our whole lives as that fiery Spirit promises to help facilitate justice in this world with us and through us as we live as ones transformed. Happy birthday. Amen.

1. Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (New York, NY: Random House, 2003), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)