What should we do?
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3rd Sunday of Advent, Year C
Shawbridge United Church and Morin Heights United Church
Luke 3:7-18

John has some harsh words to share with the crowds:
You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 9 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”
one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Yet Luke tells us : “ And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.”

Good news?? How is this scary proclamation good news?

When I was a teenager, there was a song playing on the radio called La jasette, by Kevin Parent. It started with: “Tu sais que Dieu est déjà venu. Bon ben y r’vient demain pour son compte rendu.” You know that God has come near before, well He’s coming back tomorrow to check on us.
This song was a reflection on how we would react if we knew Christ was coming back tomorrow to judge our actions. What would we do? What should we do?

This morning, we heard John announcing Jesus’ first coming and the crowd wondering the exact same thing...
What should we do?

Should we sit in dust and cover our heads with ashes while waling and crying?
Should we go up the frozen steps of St-Joseph’s oratory on our knees while reciting the Lord’s prayer?
God is coming near! God’s judgement is upon us! What should we do?

John’s answer is somewhat surprising… If you have two coats, give one to someone who has none. If you have more than enough food, give some to those who have none.

Well… I could do that. It is not that hard.
In the crowd, there are people whom most Judeans at the time would not expect to show religious zeal: tax collectors and soldiers... Those who participate in the oppression of God’s people through their collaboration with Rome. And they hear John’s proclamation to. And they might be thinking, surely, giving my second coat away is not enough to save a wretch like me! Surely, I am doomed. I will be condemned by God’s judgement.

And so, they risk the question to: What should we do??

Perhaps they are expecting John to say: Quite your job, join the zealots and fight the system! Something incredibly risky, and bold! After all, he just called them a brood of vipers!

What should we do??

But John’s answer is way simpler: do not collect more than you are supposed to. Do not use your position to extort money and oppress people for your own benefit. Just do your job, collect your wages and don’t try to pull the blanket on your side by exploiting others.

Oh! Well! We could do that. It’s not a life-threatening risk.

*The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

That is a scary image. But the good news is: we can produce fruits!

John tells the crowd: “do not begin to say to yourselves, ’We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.”

What does this mean? It means it is not enough to have been born in the right group. You still have to do the work. There must have been many in the crowds around John likely to say: We are God’s people; therefore, we are saved. This is not exclusive to Jews in the first century. You can find Christians nowadays who might say: I am a good person because I am a Christian. Which might be true or it might not... Just like there were children of Abraham producing fruits, showing by how they live their lives that they are truly like Abraham: living a life faithful to God’s call.

John says God can produce children of Abraham from stones if God wants to. In other words, being a child of Abraham is not about your DNA... It is about how you live your life.

What should we do? Says the crowd. What should we do?

Live an ethical life as best as we can... Because we can. We can look at our daily actions and inactions and wonder: have I done my best? Have I been fair? Have I been generous?
And if we have not, the good news is we can change!

God’s grace is this opportunity for change when we have not been doing what we should have been doing. Our response to God’s grace is to take that opportunity.

John announces Christ is coming:

one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Some hear this passage and wonder: Am I grain or am I chaff... Posing the question this way prevents us from asking that important question:

What should I do?

Because if we think we are chaff, we might think ourselves condemned, doomed, unable to do anything to change our fate. Powerless, helpless and wicked. But this is not how God make humanity. God made us with free will! God did not make good humans and bad humans. God made humans who have the possibility of doing good or bad things, humans who have a choice in baring fruits or not.

We are both chaff and grain. What John is telling us is that we can produce good grain. Jesus is coming and will lift up that good that we produce and help use get rid of the fruitless part that is the chaff.

God’s fire is not a fire of destruction, but a fire of purification. We are both grain and chaff... So, what should we do?

Bare as much grain as we can and let God take care of the rest.

This is Good News! We have an opportunity to work with God for a better world. A world where people have clothes to wear and food to eat. A world where people do their job without trying to exploit others or take more than they should.

Christ is coming to perfect what ever we can do to make the world more just.

This is Good News indeed!