

**What should we do?**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 20015

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" Luke 3:10

In his letter to the Philippians Paul writes, Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice. This Third Sunday in Advent is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday, taken from the Latin to rejoice. In these tense times, what terrorists acting under the guise of religious extremism want most is to keep us hostage to anxiety and fear. We refuse to give in to those fears by holding fast to the peace of God that surpasses all understanding... (Philippians 4:7) We hold to the power of God's grace that is greater than any human threat or power to destroy. We rejoice in proclaiming the ongoing power of God's grace at work in us. The significance of the celebration of the birth of Christ is greater than any anxiety over the threats of terrorism. While we want to be safe and hold to what is most important to us in these anxious times, we take comfort in Paul urging us not to give into worry and anxiety, but to seek whatever is pleasing to God.

We maintain our integrity by holding to what is right and not compromising what is wrong. We only have to read further in the letter to the Philippians in which we are encouraged to, do whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable... Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 8-9) Our best defense against fear and anxiety is to live the virtues of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

John the Baptist urged the people of his time to repent. To repent means to turn around and change the direction of our lives. Meister Eckhart explained repentance in this way: He who would be what he ought to be must stop being what he was. John knew that preaching repentance would not win him any popularity. He was not interested in that. You can imagine that being called a brood of vipers was not what the people wanted to hear, but it did gain their attention. As he told the people of his time, John is telling us in our own time that we can't assume anything about ourselves, nor should we accept the status quo.

As the people listened to what John the Baptist had to say, they asked, "What then, should we do?" He told them that if they have clothing, share with those who have none. If they have food, share with those who are hungry. Tax collectors are to be honest in what they receive and soldiers must not oppress people. Today's Christianity is concerned about victims of economic injustice and ongoing inequality with regard to race, gender and sexuality.

Lest there be any confusion as to his identity, John makes it very clear that he is not the Messiah. The one who is to come after him whose sandals he is not worthy to untie is much greater than he. John baptizes with the water of repentance, but the one who is coming will baptize with the fire of the Holy Spirit. His message is relevant for us in our own time because there is no better time than the present to get our lives in order. We can't escape being tested. We can't avoid being judged. We are tested and judged every day. We therefore must live each day in a state of readiness. Now is the time to get our lives in order by making amends and being aware of those who are easily overlooked and forgotten.

John the Baptist challenges us to change and grow. He calls us to make a personal moral inventory. We have to ask ourselves if we willing to make changes in the way we live. The best of intentions are useless unless we follow through with them. If you are not satisfied with the way you relate to people or how they relate to you, don't think that you can't change. It's never too late. We are all capable of growing into our better selves. Be more understanding and patient with that child or elderly person in your life. Be more responsive and communicative with your spouse or partner. Understand where other people are coming from before making judgments. There is no time like the present to get on with the business of bringing out the best in our selves. You and only you have the power to do that. Change requires commitment and energy and work, but it's worth it.

John the Baptist and Jesus have much in common. Both are charismatic speakers and drew large followings. Both gave their lives for what they believed. The two cousins had enormous respect for each other. What they didn't have in common was that John told his followers to fast while Jesus produced a feast for thousands. John preached repentance while Jesus preached a God of unconditional love and forgiveness. John called out sinners while Jesus mixed with them. John's warnings about judgment put them off while Jesus was all about healing and reconciliation.

Christianity is by nature counter-cultural. Christmas carols have been ringing out in the stores for weeks, but are not yet sung in church. We anticipate the joy of this season while taking an honest look at ourselves. The authentic light of Christ shines brighter than all the artificial lights of the commercial Christmas. Advent is a time of hope and expectation and we refuse to be swept up in anxiety or fear, no matter how real our fears may be.

John the Baptist echoes Isaiah's call to straighten out the dangerous curves of immorality and fill in the valleys of injustice to smooth the way for God's righteousness and justice. We can be part of making that happen by not putting off what needs to be done. Make this Advent season count by being alert and ready to meet Christ at the most unexpected times, in the most unexpected places and in the most surprising ways.