

Looking for Love
Luke 3:1 – 6, 7 – 20
Sunday, December 16, 2018

We have been basing our journey through this season of Advent on the poem “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats. The basic idea of the poem is that in the aftermath of WWI, Yeats looked around him and saw a world in chaos. And his question in this poem was, “What is coming next? Something *good* – the second coming of *Christ* – or more suffering, death, and chaos? What is about to be borne into this world?” The question that has been guiding us is, “How can hope and peace and love and joy be borne in the midst of chaos?” Not just, “How can we *find* hope and peace and love and joy,” but, “How can we *give birth* to it?” It’s not just something that happens on its own. We have to *work* for it. And sometimes it’s *hard*.

Two weeks ago we looked at Mary’s *hope* in the midst of the chaos of finding out that she was pregnant when she was not yet married; her whole life turned upside down by this situation that could result in her social or physical death. Last week Ridgley looked at Zechariah and Elizabeth and their *peace* in the midst of the chaos of finding out *they* were expecting a child after never being able to have one, and now they were very old, and Zechariah loses the ability to speak for nine months; *their* whole lives turned upside down. This week we are looking at John the Baptist and *love*. Two things that do not typically go together. We don’t usually think of John the Baptist as a *loving* person. He’s *rough*, lives out in the wilderness away from society, wears clothes that itched and smelled bad, eats weird food, yells at people to repent of their sins, calls them snakes, and tells them that God is going to cut them down and burn them. Not exactly Mr. Rogers. What does John the Baptist have to do with *love*? Where do we find that in this story? We have to really *look* for it.

Years ago, I knew a man named Bill. Bill was around 65, and he was always a little bit “off.” Like, there was something about him that was just a little *different*. He could be *rude*; like, he *said* the thing that you’re not supposed to *say* in a conversation, and just seemed oblivious to the fact that you’re not supposed to say that. He didn’t have good personal hygiene, and he smelled bad. He would come into my office every week and tell me why my sermon was wrong. He could be very critical and judgmental of people. He didn’t really have many friends because he rubbed people the wrong way. He had a limp and walked with a cane, so I could always hear him when he was walking down the hall to my office, and I would just kind of take a deep breath and brace myself for whatever was about to come.

Well, one day Bill came into my office, and he was *really* worked up. The city council had just passed a measure that Bill saw as having a very negative impact on people in the community who were poor. He explained it to me and said, “They’re just doing this without any thought as to how it’s going to affect the poor!” He had been at the meeting, and he spoke out against it, but no one really paid him any attention because *it’s just Bill*. But the more I listened to him, I said, “Bill, you’re *right*. What are you going to *do* about it?” So he told me that he was going to write up a petition, and he had to get a certain number of people to sign it, and he said, “I probably can’t get that many signatures, and they probably won’t listen to me even if I *do*, but I have to *try*. Someone *has* to do *something*.”

So for the next month, Bill went all around town collecting signatures. He came into my office one day and told me that he had *done it*. He got the number of signatures he needed. He was *so proud* of himself. He went and filed the petition, and on his way home he slipped on a patch of ice, hit his head on the sidewalk, and died. In the time between his death and his funeral, the council met, discussed his petition, and there were about a dozen people there who spoke in

Bill's place. And the council reversed their decision. He did it, even though he wasn't able to see it. He literally gave his life in the pursuit of justice for the poor (this measure wouldn't even have affected *him*). It was an act of *love* because *their* lives mattered to him as much as his own.

John the Baptist is kind of like Bill. He looks at the world around him and sees injustice and inequality; those who *have* wealth and power taking advantage of those who do *not*. This is the *chaos* that John found himself in – the sinfulness of the world around him. This is why he is so upset at the religious leaders. He sees people in positions of power *using* their power not to *help* the poor but to *hurt* them; to raise *themselves* up higher and push the low down lower. That's why he calls them *vipers*, snakes, predators who prey on the small and the weak. And he calls them to *repent*; to *change* their actions.

John is described as a lone voice crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." That's not just John talking about *landscaping*. It's talking about the social order. Those who are *high* will be brought down, while those who are *low* will be raised up, until everyone is on the same level, treated with equal justice and fairness, and *all flesh* sees the salvation of God.

People come to John, and they ask him, "What then should we do?" And John says, "Whoever has *two* coats must share with anyone who has *none*; whoever has *food* must do likewise. Tax collectors came to him and said, "What should we do," and John said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers came to him and said, "What should we do," and

John said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations.” All of these were common examples of those *with* power taking advantage of those *without*.

John’s *love* is made manifest in his concern and care for those who are poor. And John is *not* poor. Remember, his father Zechariah is a priest, well taken care of, and John likely would have followed in his footsteps. These abuses against the poor would not have impacted John; he was *fine*. But he’s not crying out against it because it *affects* him. He’s crying out against it because it is *wrong*, and he cares as much about *their* lives as he does about his *own*. If there is one thing that John could have learned from his father Zechariah, it’s what it is like to not have a *voice*. Zechariah loses his voice for nine months, and John spends his life crying out.

We can’t just care about the things that affect *us*. We also have to speak up for those who have no voice.

Our world is not that far removed from John’s, and the chaos that *he* saw is still present among us today. Those who *have* power oppressing and taking advantage of those who do *not*; building *themselves* up *higher*, while they push the *low* down *lower*. We look around us, and we see the same sinfulness in the world that John saw. What, then, should *we* do? Like John, we show our love by caring for the poor and the victims of oppression and injustice. By clothing the naked and feeding the hungry and not taking more than we need so that everyone has enough. By standing up and speaking out for those who have no voice, and then working to ensure that they *get* one.

And we *do* that, not for our *own* sake, not because of anything that *we* get out of it. We do it because we love our neighbor; because *their* lives matter as much to us as *our own*. And we do

it in a way that points to Jesus Christ and prepares the way for his coming, just like John did. Everything that John did, he pointed to Christ and said, “One greater than me is coming, and my actions are simply preparing the way for *him*.” Because *when* we love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and *when* we care for those who are poor and oppressed, Christ is *in* that. Like Jesus said, “As you do to the least of these, you do to me.”

So the *way* that we bring about love in the midst of the chaos and sinfulness of this world is by caring for the poor and the oppressed in a way that points to Jesus Christ and says, “We do this because that’s who Christ is.” We love those whom Christ loved, and we care for those that Christ cared about.

I have *seen* you all doing that by sponsoring over 100 Angel Tree kids, making sure that *they* receive gifts for Christmas, not because it affects *you*, but because you care about *them* as much as you care about *yourselves*. I’ve seen it through your work with TE Care, especially the Christmas drive that just wrapped up, making sure that those in need right here in our own community have what they need. I’ve seen it in the ways that you visit those who are sick or in the hospital or just lonely. The ways you advocate and write letters for those who have no voice. The ways that you hear about a situation and ask, “How can I help?”

I look for love in this story, and I find *you*. You have increased the amount of love in this chaotic world. And it’s because of *you*, what Christ is doing *through* you, that I have hope that something *good* is coming into this world.

Mother Teresa once said, “At this Christmas when Christ comes, will He find a warm heart? Mark the season of Advent by loving and serving others with God’s own love and concern.”¹ Whatever chaos you see in the world or experience in your own life, the best way to counter it is through simple acts of love and care for others. In doing *that*, Christ will come among us.

¹ Mother Teresa, *Love: A Fruit Always in Season*.