

**Riverside United Church**  
**December 15, 2024 - Advent 3**

Scripture Lesson: Luke 3: 7-16, Isaiah 58: 9b-12

John 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? Bear 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. Even now the axe 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.'

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.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers 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.'

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John 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.'

**Isaiah 58: 9b-12**

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.  
The Lord will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.  
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,  
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,  
lead us to deeper understanding of you,

and the love you call us to live. Amen.

**“Words for the Beginning: #3 - Do the Good that is Yours to Do”**

One of the names that is often used to describe one of the Advent Sundays is White Gift Sunday. It is a time when we bring gifts to distribute within the community to those who need food, clothing, etc.

When I was in Sunday School, I can remember choosing a can of food, or a book, or a pair of mittens and we would wrap the gift in plain white paper. It would be a search for plain white paper - because not every house had a home printer back then - and then we would wrap the gift. We wrapped the gift so that no one else knew what we brought. It was a great way of reducing the sense of comparison between gifts and between ability to give or level of generosity. We brought a white gift and that was an important lesson that Christmas is about reaching beyond oneself and giving to others.

Today, we have brought gifts - few of them are wrapped - some of them are gifts of money, so that we can channel our generosity towards the needs in our neighbourhood. And we are a generous congregation responding to various needs through the year.

On this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, we continue our series that reminds us of Words for the Beginning. Words for the beginning of a new church year in Advent, words for various new beginnings in our lives. So far, we have heard the important phrases: You are a Blessing and We Can't Go Alone. Today we add to the bouquet of wisdom: Do the Good that is Yours to Do.

This word of truth and wisdom emerges out of the reading from Luke where he hear the teaching and preaching of John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the child of Elizabeth and Zechariah and it was just two weeks ago that we heard that Mary went to her cousin Elizabeth for support, as Elizabeth was also pregnant. John the Baptist is that child that was born before Jesus and now we hear that as an adult he goes before Jesus preparing the way. He is a bit of wild character but it's clear that he is preparing for the one to come. As he preaches and engages people with the good news, he hears the question, “What then should we do?” He is asked this three times and he gives three different answers. To one he says if you have two coats, give one away. To the tax collectors, who ask “What then should we do?”, he says don't cheat those from whom you are collecting. Soldiers then asked him ‘What then shall we do? And he advises that them not to exhort money from anyone by threats or false accusations.

If John the Baptist was in our midst, and we asked him, “What then shall we do? - what do you think he would say? Maybe it would be : “Do the good that is yours to do.”

The gift of this story is that John answered the questions with responses that were within the possibility of action of those who were asking. He didn't ask the soldiers to stop collecting more taxes, but that was something that the tax collectors could do.

We live in a time when the needs of the world can be overwhelming. There is a great sense of anguish about some of the trends and priorities of our society and world. We can quickly be

driven to despair, to cynicism, to apathy. We can get angry at the powers and principalities of our time whose actions and inaction produce so much need and heartache. And we can feel powerless.

What then shall we do? Do the good that is yours to do.

I have a friend who recently reflected on his despair on the outcome of the election in the US, but then recognized that there is little he can do about that, but he can do things that are within his realm of action and influence to foster peace, nurture hope and to seek joy.

Do the good that is yours to do.

As I was thinking about these wise words for the beginning, I was trying to imagine a pageant, because sometimes this is pageant Sunday, I was trying to imagine a pageant where we could share how we do the good that is ours/yours to do. We could do some tableaux, scenes, characters to act it out. Maybe a litany would be better form of communication. Maybe story telling. I know that we respond in a variety of ways to the needs of one another, our community and world.

What is an example of how you have heeded the word - Do the good that is yours to do?

I think the list would be long:

- a phone call made
- a note or email written
- a gift offered
- a listening ear offered to a friend or a stranger
- organizing a meeting to address a concern
- giving money to a good cause
- volunteering to help on the spur of the moment or as a regular weekly commitment

I remember visiting a woman in a nursing home many years ago and she was telling me about her years of teaching Sunday school and helping in various ways at her church. That Sunday School had been really her ministry. She told me that she couldn't do that anymore, but each Saturday night she would pray for the Sunday School teachers preparing to teach the next day. Do the good that is yours to do.

In this season of Advent and Christmas, the Spirit of God prompts us to seek need and to respond and so we are invited to respond to the meaning of Advent and Christmas with commitment to be the channels of peace and agents of compassion and hope.

John the Baptist was a prophet and we might wonder how effective it would be for our primary message or our opening line to be, "you brood of vipers!" But, John the Baptist was in the prophetic tradition that includes the Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah. In our other reading today, we hear his hopeful tone with words such as:

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
 the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
 if you offer your food to the hungry

and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.

He goes on to invite the faithful to be repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

This is an important prophetic word for our time and place. It is a challenge to know what it means to be faithful in our time and place. There are so many distorted versions of religion and Christian teaching that it is hard to know what the prophetic word of truth needs to be.

Do the good that is yours to do - is an important word to hold - but sometimes it is hard to know what is good. The breach of shared values is so wide and broken. How can it be repaired?

I have been greatly disturbed this week about the story out of the US and the murder of the Health Care Company Executive - Brian Thompson. The suspect has been caught, but in some circles is seen as a hero for taking action amidst so much frustration about the health care insurance industry. But, it was a murder. The suspect had been caught because a fast food worker recognized the man in the restaurant. Maybe that worker had been in church and had been told "Do the good that's yours to do", and the worker did the good - and yet she is being portrayed as a snitch. But, it was a murder.

It is greatly disturbing that the moral compass has shifted to justify killing a man as a response to the health care industry's actions and frustrations. Now, I am glad that we don't live in a system where insurance companies get to make medical decisions, and so there is a tide of frustration in the streets but can that tide justify actions that are criminal?

We may not have that tide of unrest in our context, but there are undercurrents that are disturbing. And so how, do we be repairers of the breach - repairers of the gap between attitudes and the way of peace, civility and common sense?

What then shall we do? Do the good that is yours to do. And that good needs to align with defined or commonly understood - common good.

As I was reflecting on all of this, as so often happens, a quote appeared on Facebook. It is a quote of John Wesley (he didn't put it up there) - John Wesley's one of our ancestors on the Methodist branch of our faith tree. John Wesley offered the wisdom: "do all the good you can by all the means you can to all the people you can in all the places you can, as long as ever you can."

I'll say that again in case you missed it. "do all the good you can by all the means you can to all the people you can in all the places you can, as long as ever you can."

Amen