

December 16, 2018  
Third Sunday of Advent, Year C, RCL  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Zephaniah 3:14-20  
Canticle 9  
Philippians 4:4-7  
Luke 3:7-18

You better watch out  
You better not cry  
Better not pout  
I'm telling you why  
Santa Claus is coming to town

He's making a list  
And checking it twice;  
Gonna find out  
Who's naughty and nice  
Santa Claus is coming to town

He sees you when you're sleeping  
He knows when you're awake  
He knows if you've been bad or good  
So be good for goodness sake!

O! You better watch out!  
You better not cry  
Better not pout  
I'm telling you why  
Santa Claus is coming to town<sup>1</sup>

Children learn at an early age that the Christmas stakes are high: Santa will deliver either a coveted toy or a dreaded lump of coal.

The fact is that even the most well-behaved and well-intentioned child will fall short of perfection. Santa has now deployed a posse of Elves on Shelves to keep tabs on his behalf. With all that extra policing, Santa will certainly find out about even the tiniest transgression. In the moment of judgment, as Santa stands with toy in right hand and coal in left, the mortified child has one strategy remaining: splitting hairs. I was only a *little* naughty! I'm pretty sure I was *good enough!* No one actually *saw me* cry or pout!

It's no wonder that this is a stressful time of year. Most of us adults have been hearing that song all our lives. As far back as we can remember, we've been managing seasonal performance anxiety.

If we look for relief from the Gospel this week, we're not going to get it. John the Baptist could be singing our Christmas ditty, replacing "Santa Claus" with "Jesus Christ." I would rather skip all this anguish and move right on to the pregnant Mary, but it must not yet be time—the lectionary is forcing us to pause. On the way to the sweet baby Jesus, we have to endure a second week of the cantankerous adult John.

Last week, John began traipsing the environs of Jordan River, "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." This must have generated considerable buzz; this week, the crowds have shown up for John's baptism. John is obliging them, but he seems pessimistic about whether his efforts will make any difference. Here's the catch: passive baptism isn't the point; active repentance is. Baptism is just the start.

It seems that the people want to be eligible for the benefits of baptism but exempt from the costs of repentance. The also text infers that they expect special treatment simply because of their ancestry. John warns that this simply is not true. He drives this point home by addressing them with what would then have been a razor-sharp pejorative literally translated as "children of snakes." As the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the proof of repentance is in the bearing of fruit. The people have to step up. On the hook, they ask, "What then should we do?"

John's recipe is this: share; don't cheat; don't extort. Share; don't cheat; don't extort. Like us, John's listeners must have learned these rudimentary rules for human engagement by the time they finished kindergarten. Therefore, if they are at all surprised, it can only be at this recipe's simplicity. Still, for John to mention them, hoarding, cheating, and extortion must be at destructive levels. Therefore, while John's recipe is simple and rudimentary, it must also be exceedingly hard.

Apparently that's no excuse. John says that time is up. The Messiah is on the way. Rather than a toy and a lump of coal, his hands are holding an ax and a winnowing fork. Soon, that which is not productive will be purged and burned.

To use the words of those folks at the River Jordan, What then should *we do*?

Can we *please* move on to the sweet baby Jesus?

Pretty soon, but not yet. Instead, let's revisit what I said earlier: Even the most well-behaved and well-intentioned child will fall short of perfection. God has now deployed Jesus to keep tabs on his behalf. With all that extra policing, God will certainly know about even the tiniest transgression. In the moment of judgment, as Jesus stands with ax in right hand and winnowing fork in left, the mortified child is left with one remaining strategy: splitting hairs. I was only a *little* naughty! I'm pretty sure I was *good enough*! No one actually *saw me* cry or pout!

We are conditioned to hear in John's words the threat of eternal damnation. But if God *is* actively reconciling *all* things, one might legitimately question whether God plans for *anyone* eternal damnation. So let's take another look at what John might be saying here. John speaks particularly of axing down the unfruitful tree and winnowing away the useless chaff. Both actions involve the removal of what that which does not give life. This allows the portion that *does* give life to give life more abundantly.

John's examples involve life support, and that's probably not incidental. Like the prophets before them, John and his peers would have been centrally concerned with the survival of the people of Israel as a group. The life and survival of the individual was completely entwined with the life and survival of the group. John is calling individuals to inhabit the group in life-supporting ways. He warns that those who don't are at risk of separation—they're at risk of separation, *and* the Messiah is coming. The threat of separation from the group, particularly just before the arrival of the one who will ensure its future, would have been a sobering and painful prospect.

What then should *we* do? One author writes this:

The question at the heart of this text—"What [then should] we do?"—differs significantly from "What [should] we believe?" or even "What [should] we prayerfully discern as our role in mission?" It differs more still from the question that, if we are honest, we know we have asked: "How [should] we interpret John's words in such a way that we may maintain our comfort while our neighbors suffer?" John's response is clear. Repentance has to do with ethics, with action, with the Holy Spirit's compelling us to be God's hands and feet in the world—with attention to the needs of others rather than preoccupation with our own salvation.<sup>2</sup>

"... attention to the needs of others rather than preoccupation with our own salvation." It may be that those of us in a church like this do okay releasing preoccupation with our own salvation. You're never going to hear fire and brimstone from this pulpit. But I wonder whether that serves to drive our performance anxiety underground.

It can be pretty hard to *truly believe* and *deeply know* that God's endless grace is offered freely to each and every one of us. Maybe that's why we are so distracted by coveted toys and lumps of coal; knowing that we are imperfect, we keep splitting hairs, listing our naughty and nice, and calculating whether we are good enough. In fact, sometimes we are so preoccupied with doing the math that we don't even notice that we have been the instruments of our own separation. Because we do it to ourselves, there isn't even any need for axes or winnowing forks.

I don't think there has ever been a person who has attained a permanent condition of *truly believing* and *deeply knowing* God's endless grace. Most of us don't even get close, and instead range back and forth in poor degree. This is yet another way in which no one is perfect, and sometimes yet another way in which we measure our own failure. The person whose goal is perfection *will* fail. But the point isn't perfection. God isn't waiting for you to *screw up*; God is waiting for you to *show up*, with *your* hands and *your* feet.

The writer Maya Angelou once said this:

I'm working at trying to be a Christian and that's serious business. It's not something where you think, "Oh, I've got it done. I did it all day—hot diggity." The truth is, all day long you try to do it, try to be it. And then in the evening, if you're honest and have a little courage, you look at yourself and say, "Hmmm. I only blew it 86 times. Not bad." I'm trying to be a Christian.

...

I'm always amazed . . . when [people] walk up to me and say, "I'm a Christian." I always think, "Already? You've already got it? My goodness, you're fast."<sup>3</sup>

Share; don't cheat; don't extort. Our Messiah *is* coming, and *we* are coming along. Maybe a good Advent practice is to try identifying oneself not as *a Christian*, but as *trying-to-be-a-Christian*. This names both our aspiration and our limitation, both our strength and our weakness. These are important things to notice during the season of preparation we call Advent. The One who can reconcile it for us *is* coming. Sweet baby Jesus *is* coming.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town" by John Frederick Coots and Haven Gillespie. According to Wikipedia, the song was originally performed on the Eddie Cantor's radio show in 1934, and "Cantor's original performance, broadcast at the height of the Great Depression, included verses not in the standard version of the song, encouraging listeners to be charitable and help the less-fortunate at Christmas." See "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town," available online at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa\\_Claus\\_Is\\_Comin%27\\_to\\_Town](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Claus_Is_Comin%27_to_Town) (accessed December 15, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Austin Crenshaw Shelley, "Living by the Word" for Advent 3C (Luke 3:7-18), *The Christian Century*, November 6, 2018, available online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/december-16-advent-3c-luke-37-18> (accessed December 15, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Maya Angelou, quoted in Peter W. Marty, "The life of faith takes practice," *The Christian Century*, October 17, 2018, available online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/publisher/li-fe-faith-takes-practice> (accessed December 15, 2018).