

“Do the Good That Is Yours to Do”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
First Sunday of Advent  
December 1, 2024

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Isaiah 58 9b-12  
Luke 3:7-16

What do you do to get ready for the coming of Jesus Christ? When we think of getting ready for Christmas, I know that next week, the church will gather after worship to nominate elders and deacons to serve as officers of the church, and then we will all decorate the sanctuary and fireplace room with greenery and lights. The children and youth already are busy practicing the Christmas Pageant for December 22, and I know Renée, the choir, and our musicians will be working on some special music to help welcome the Christ child.

As I began writing this sermon a couple weeks ago, Chris was going through our house and doing some creative destruction. There were huge piles of things everywhere, as she emptied storage baskets and hauled out clothing we hadn't looked at since last winter. We literally found cases where we had two of the same coat for each of us, and decided that we should give three of them away. Chris is a really visual person, and so she cannot think straight when our household space is cluttered. If you have not noticed, I am kind of the opposite! Creative chaos is where I produce some of my best work! Although, spending Thanksgiving with my sister I see where I get it. But I do respect that Chris is on to something wise. That act of clearing the clutter is a metaphor for us spiritually, too. Advent is a time to think about the clutter. Think about what is excessive or wasteful and needs cleansing. Think about what can be offered to someone in need. In return, we find space for openness and clearness. There is more space to examine where God is leading us. We make room for the Christ Child, and we also make room for the fact that Jesus may come to us in the experience of the poor, the forgotten, the oppressed.

As we think of how we might prepare, instead of thinking of holiday decorations and hosting, I invite you to a place that is a bit more raw, a bit more wild, more

chaotic even than the unsorted boxes of last year's winter clothes. Our scriptures lead us to the wilderness, where John the Baptist preached to those who came to be baptized. "You brood of vipers!" he called out to them. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." Repentance, according to the biblical Greek word *metanoia*, is a changing of one's mind, a reorientation, a fundamental transformation of outlook.<sup>1</sup>

One of the exciting things about being in my late 40's is that I am now one of the middle aged aunties. And I delight in seeing this generation of young adults. Change is easier for them than it is for us. I am a little relieved, but also maybe a tad jealous, that I am not the weird one anymore who shocks the rest of the family— my brother would probably try to fight me for that title of weird one back in the day, but either way he and I now have to yield our roles to the next generation. The thing I envy about this age is that they are more ripe for making changes in their lives. Of my relatives and family friends I saw, those ages 18 to 26 were doing things like a cousin's kid living on a boat, or my college best friend's daughter coming to recognize herself as autistic, or a niece considering a move across the country when she has only lived within a 60 mile radius from home her entire life, or a cousin expressing their gender in new ways. They are figuring out how to live and move more authentically in the world, and in many ways doing that courageously. Further, they are blessing those of us older relatives by inviting us to know them and see them and maybe have our minds changed by them. When is the last time, for those of us who are of an older generation, we dared to make a big change in our lives?

In addition to being moved by my younger relatives, it was a joy to have my surprise sister and her daughters come down for Thanksgiving. If you haven't heard me tell the story, my surprise sister is a sister I found out about 13 years ago— even my dad did not know about this surprise offspring he helped to create while he was a traveling musician in 1970, until Laura Jane, 13 years ago, had her adoption records unsealed and with the help of Facebook and DNA testing, tracked our dad down. Laura Jane is 2 months older than my sister Alice, who I grew up with. Alice and I didn't tell our mom about Laura Jane immediately when we learned about her, but in the years since my mom's death, Laura Jane and her daughters have become more and more a part of our lives. Now we are very

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<sup>1</sup> Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, "Repentance and Confession"  
<http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith8493>

close; they travel with us on family vacation; and since Laura Jane's adoptive parents have died, they come to Atlanta now for Thanksgiving. I had assumed that my sister, who still sees my mom's side of the family every Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter, had told my mom's 3 siblings and their families about Laura Jane. It turns out she hadn't. And so, when the Thanksgiving family gathering for my mom's side ran several hours late Thursday night, and Laura Jane and her two daughters arrived two hours earlier than expected to sleep over for the Fowler family gathering the next day, in walked these three women, Laura Jane and her two daughters. They are all three beautiful, and all three even taller than I am. There was no way they would just blend in, even in a large Southern family gathering. I introduced them to Uncle Wayne, the patriarch of the family. "This is my sister, Laura Jane." The look of utter confusion that exploded on his face— my sister Alice thinks he was convinced he was suffering a bout of dementia!

This is the uncle who so beautifully took a fallen cedar tree from my great-grandmother's grave, and cut into it to make a keepsake for each household. John the Baptist proclaimed, "Even now, the ax is lying at the root of the trees." The family tree does not continue in expected ways. But I guarantee you that if you can be open to it growing in ways that will add to the love and connection in your life, even if it doesn't fit into what you were expected, you will be rewarded. My surprise sister and her daughters are a joy and blessing in my life, and an unexpected grace from God.

Christmas often brings up nostalgia, memories of a simpler time, and tradition. And the Western, capitalist version adds jingle bells, elves, sweets, and lots of shopping. I cast no shade, because I enjoy these, too. But we need to be careful that these traditions do not anesthetize us from the rawness of the wilderness, where John the Baptist calls out. He warned, "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." In other words, John warned people to not get so comfortable in their identity as heirs of Abraham— a man from many generations past— that they fail to live as God calls them *today*.

Recently a term called "spiritual bypassing" has caught my attention. It comes out of Buddhist practice, but I think it has something to say to Christians, too. According to John Welwood, a Buddhist teacher and practitioner, Spiritual

Bypassing is the “tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks.” An example is when we speak of Christmas as “the most wonderful time of the year,” but ignore our deep grief that someone we love has died. Or, “in the spirit of peace,” we let a racist remark fly at the company Christmas party, without questioning it. We might say that for John’s audience, when they took deep spiritual pride in their identity as heirs of Abraham, but at the same time cheated the poor by overly taxing them, that was spiritual bypassing. John wants us to cut that out, right at the source: every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” It sounds harsh, but what John demands is an honest accounting of our emotional, spiritual, and social landscape as a way of getting ready for the coming Christ. Telling the truth about our lives frees us to pivot more readily when Jesus calls us to transformation.

So what should we do? That’s what the crowds asked John. “What, then, should we do?” The answer is probably not to bust in on someone’s Christmas cheer with doom and gloom. We need to unveil unrighteous power against people, some because they are poor, or immigrants, and against others because of their gender, or who they love, or the racial identities, or their ability or disability or age. At the same time, we probably all hope to be invited to Christmas parties.

John’s answer is to do the good that is yours to do. You do not have to fix every injustice or each broken heart. This goal is a quick way to become overwhelmed, shut down hope and give up. John did not tell people they have to overthrow the Roman empire, even as oppressive as they were to the Jews. John also did not tell those getting baptised that they need to fix the problems that were showing in the institutionalized practice of Temple Judaism. Instead, John told them, if you have two coats, give one to someone who doesn’t have a coat. He told soldiers not to use their power to cheat others with threats or lies. He told tax collectors to only collect what is due, and not pocket extra. The prophet in Isaiah similarly advised small things any of us can do:

“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.”

The world is a parched place. But for each of us, we have a small practice that is like a drop of water, and when many bring the water they can, we can manage to make this world look a little bit closer to the world God envisioned when God chose to shake us up with holy birth. When each one does the good that is yours to do, we suddenly see that the world looks like a good place, a hopeful place, a place where holy things can, indeed, happen.

For my time here with you at the Presbyterian Church in Leonia, John the Baptist has been worth my aspiration. If I can share any glimmer of what is holy with you— that hope, that peace, that joy, that love— it is only pointing the way; it is only preparation for the *real* thing, which is so much more powerful, abundant, and good. And it invites you to *metanoia*— turning your life, to do the good that is *yours* to do, in working to bring forward the world God imagines so vividly that God chose to come to us as Jesus Christ, and help us build it.