Harvesting Christmas Fruit

The Third Sunday of Advent
December 15, 2024
Luke 3:7-18
Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

You won't find John the Baptist hanging around the nativity scene. I know this because I spent a fair amount of time scouring the internet this fall for reasonably priced figurines to add to the church's nativity scene. I quickly ran into two problems: the first was that my definition of "reasonably priced" does not match the one used by creators of figurines for church nativity scenes.

Unless you happen to be related to the Italian artist whose company seems to have a monopoly on producing church nativity scenes, you will not find anything "reasonably priced

We were looking for a few extra pieces to round out our nativity scene: we thought a shepherd or two might be wonderful, and of course, a trio of wise men. Pat Cook and I started searching the Internet, generally finding that with the exception of expensive Italian statuettes, or painted molded plastic figurines with eyes that resemble aliens, there's not much. We found a few magi and angels, but these were exorbitantly priced. And don't even get me started on the prices of shepherds these days.

Needless to say, adding a John the Baptist to our set was out of the question.

Pat had better luck than I did in herding up shepherds and cattle, and she even located a reasonable angel. I guess you just have to know where to look.

I did locate one John the Baptist, but he was much too small and seemed to look more like a G.I. Joe action figure than a prophet—a bit too much like Rambo the Baptist. His knees were dirty, his cloak stained with honey and bug guts. The look in his face seemed to convey the message that he was ready to kill on command.

Of course, if truth be told, this is exactly the sort of person we encounter. On this third Sunday of Advent, the day when we light the pink candle of joy, we come face to face with this burly, unruly prophet. He's out in the wilderness—an appropriate place for someone as untamed as John. His message, too, evokes reminders of Israel's moments

of trial in the wilderness: he stands with his feet dripping in the mud of the Jordan, his hands wet with the water of baptism. He echoes the words of Isaiah:

"Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.
[5] *Every valley will be filled,*
and every mountain and hill
will be leveled.
The crooked will be made straight
and the rough places made smooth.
[6] *All humanity will see God's salvation.*[1]

Knee-deep in sin and the murky waters of Jordan, John is whooping and hollering and waving his arms like an honest to goodness fire-breathing, tongue-speaking, snake handling Pentecostal preacher. His message is as discomforting as his presence, his sermons filled with doom and gloom. We may imagine John sounding like a black-tie clad tenor soloist pelting out Handel's cherished "Comfort Ye, Comfort Ye, My People," but the words he speaks are more challenge than they are comfort.

John sound like that machine-gun toting gangster in "Home Alone" who shoots his gun at the delivery guy while saying, "Keep the change, ya filthy animal."

Good news? Really, Luke?

Maybe—if we learn what it means to bear the fruit of Christmas.

John shows up regularly on the second and third Sundays of Advent. His main job seems to be the warm-up act for Jesus, breaking the ground for the one who is coming whom John says will even be more powerful than he.

Luke reminds us that crowds found John's message urgent and compelling. But I wonder: how many of them came out of mere curiosity? How many came out of an urgent need to address a gnawing sense of emptiness within them? Or did they show up because a friend said to them, "You've got to see this?"

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[1] *Common English Bible* (Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2011), Lk 3:4–6.

John saw them as carrying the possibilities of God. He looked at them the way my father used to look at the fruit trees in our backyard in California. Dad would look at the branches, the leaves. He was no orchard-ist, no arborist. If he saw something he didn't like, he'd take out his pocketknife, the same knife he used to clean fingernails and cut apples, and trim out the rotten fruit. He'd head out there afterwork, looking at every branch, every bud, every bloom, practically counting the numbers of lemons he expected to harvest. John looks at the crowds, knowing they carry within them the possibilities of God.

And somehow his message of repentance and urgency hit home with those who heard it. Matthew and Mark tell us that John's message attracted crowds from Jerusalem and "all Judea," while Luke just tells us that there were crowds. Perhaps the message for the church is that we'd have better luck attracting crowds if you hired preachers with scraggly beards and whose robs were smeared with the remnants of locusts dipped in honey!

And his message is equally confounding. While Luke tells us John's message was filled with exhortations of good news, I wonder how many of you would ever return if I started a sermon with "You brood of vipers!" How many of us are looking forward to opening up a Christmas card this week emblazoned with the message, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?"

But these are the words Luke considers "good news." It makes me wonder: what about John's challenge to repent becomes our reason to rejoice?

I'm told that the best sermons end without resolving the tensions we encounter in the scripture, which means this might be just end up being the best sermon you've ever heard. The tension in John's message to repent never decreases. It was a message that rattled Herod, but also a message that converted tax collectors, who were certainly some of the slimiest people in town. Even soldiers were moved to change their lives, asking John, "And we, what should we do?"

John says to us: now is the time to bear fruit. Repentance is more than just cataloging our sins. It involves changing our hearts. Repentance leads us from speaking words of harm to proclaiming messages of hope. Repentance causes us to bear fruits of love—even in the depts of winter. This is our Advent message: to bear the fruit of a life that is changed.

Repentance means allowing the pain we have caused ourselves and the pain we have inflicted on others to become transformed. Father Gregory Boyle, who has spent his life living among gang members in Los Angeles and has led them to find new purpose and meaning loves to say that unless we allow our pain to become transformed we will most assuredly continue transmitting that pain to others.

That is the good news: Bear fruit of joyful witness to the love of God at work within you, and rejoice.

Become fruitful. Not just the Harry and David fruit of the month club type fruit, but something even more abundant than that.

We become generous with the poor.
We become kinder to those who have little.
We become agents of God's love with those encumbered by hate.

We become like the incredible fruitcake my mother always made. I know that the mere mention of fruitcake creates division and raises eyebrows. But hear me out: my mother's depression-era recipe brought together exotic ingredients like candied cherries and unnaturally colored sugary fruits, mixing them with magic and baking with love. The finished cake was wrapped in layers of brandy-soaked cheesecloth and then stored on a shelf in the hall closet. One cake would last for years, and whenever we opened it up, we had to extinguish all the candles for fear the brandy would ignite. We become the fruit of Christmas.

Looking at his sad, slumping little tree, Charlie Brown tells Linus "I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel." Linus grabs his blanket and shrugs. "Charlie Brown," he says, "you're the only person I know who can take a wonderful season like Christmas and turn it into a problem."

"Charlie Brown," says Linus, "You're the only person I know that I can take a wonderful season like Christmas and turn it into a problem." But then, gathering his courage, little Linus allows the rejoicing to begin with these simple words: "For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

Rejoice. Rejoice, even as you repent and bear witness to the coming of Christ. Amen.