

We Seem to be Getting Mixed Messages!

[Text - Luke 3:2-3; 7-17]

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November 29, 2015

This morning, I'd like to literally capture the ominous tone of John the Baptist woeful warning about the coming of the Messiah. I'll attempt to do this by commandeering the tune of a contemporary Christmas song.

O You better watch out, you better not lie,
Better beware, I'm telling you why,
The Holy One is coming to earth.
He's made up a list, checked it out twice,
Already knows you're naughty, not nice!
The Holy One is coming to earth.
He sees you when you're cheating,
He knows that you're a fake,
He knows that you've been bad, not good,
So prepare to meet your fate!
O You better watch out, better not lie,
Better beware, I'm telling you why,
The Holy One has come down to earth!

That little ditty may not be well voiced, but John the Baptist is definitely well versed when it comes to understanding and expressing the judgment and wrath of God. He's very familiar with some of the harsh words of the Hebrew prophets; and his own message certainly conveys that foreboding feeling. And now, with Jesus bursting onto the scene, John anticipates even *more* doom and gloom - this time, more devastating than anything the prophets of old could imagine. First Century Israel is a nation in tremendous turmoil and trouble, under the iron rule of the Roman Empire. Many Israelites feel that Rome's dominance is a sign that their religious culture needs a drastic shake-up. Many of them, including John, believe that God is preparing to send the long-awaited Messiah - a formidable figure who will overthrow the Romans, and deal swiftly and severely with the

corruption within the Hebrew community. They are expecting an imposing individual, who will bring in the Reign of God with a devastating blow - bringing bad news to those who were on God's "bad side"; yet good news to those faithful few who are good enough to receive it. Fortunately, however, they are mistaken.

Rather than ushering in the Divine Realm with a cataclysmic event, Jesus comes to establish that Realm with words and acts of kindness and compassion, gentleness and grace. Rather than bring more pain and grief to a world which is already struggling, Jesus comes to share that pain and grief and struggle. He is fully committed to live his life, and even give his life, so that the Reality of Divine Love will be abundantly clear to every person on earth!

Jesus teaches with a remarkable clarity and a personal integrity that is refreshingly different from many other religious leaders. He performs works of wonder and power - feeding hungry multitudes, healing the sick, cleansing lepers, raising-up those who are downcast and outcast. Jesus proclaims a radically inclusive message of Good News - presenting a picture of a compassionate Heavenly Father-*Mother!* One whose deepest desire is to gather and shelter all of Her children, just like a hen gathers and protects her entire brood. Jesus portrays the Holy One as a Divine *Lover* of people, whose only concern is that this love be reciprocated. And perhaps most stunning of all, Jesus contends that this Divine Love is reciprocated - not through our acts of religious piety - but by our passionately loving *all* our neighbors as we love ourselves!

John the Baptist is absolutely correct in believing that the Messiah is coming to "take care" of the sinners of this world; but his understanding of how the Messiah will take care of them, is clearly off-base. John anticipates a resounding blast of law and judgment; but Jesus brings a redemptive blessing of love and grace. Maybe that's why John will later ask of Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" Apparently, John's limited understanding of Divine Love and Grace, makes it difficult for him to envision and recognize Jesus as the Messiah. In spite of John's greatness, he has

trouble grasping Jesus' *greater* vision of the wonderful and welcoming Divine Realm.

John and others are expecting that the Messiah will come with a list of those who are naughty, and those who are nice. And like most of us who prefer to think that we're on the nice list [while *others* are the naughty ones] so it is with the majority of Israel's religious leaders. They *know* who will incur the wrath of God! It's all those other "sinners": the tax-collectors and prostitutes; Romans and Samaritans; foreign infidels and all those other people who don't fit their own predetermined picture of how a godly person should look and behave.

In his reflections for our *BUCC Advent Devotional Book*, Matt Wolbert does an excellent job of capturing the character and the tone of John the Baptist. [That's right, I will shamelessly borrow BUCC members' marvelous ideas, insights and imagery for my own use - so you better watch out!] Matt essentially says this: 'The reason I like this image of that dirty, weird wearer of camel hair - with his locusts and wild honey, and his fire-and-brimstone preaching - is because it reminds me to look for the spirit inside each person, rather than judging them by their outer shell. It's so much easier to judge a book, or a black person, or a sullen teenager, or a haggard homeless person by their cover! To assume what they are thinking and feeling; and to predetermine what our interaction with them will be like. The good news is, we don't have to be perfect at accepting people the way they are; the important part is that we try our best to be open to the possibilities!'

In this Advent Season, you and I can be open to all kinds of possibilities, for treating all kinds of people in ways that transcend society's normally suspicious and uncaring attitude. We can heed John the Baptist's call to "repent", and turn-away from our impulse to judge and dismiss those who are different from us. We can follow Jesus' wonderful example of feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, lifting-up the oppressed, and warmly welcoming the stranger. And most importantly, you and I can look at all those people scurrying around us - trying to find those perfect Christmas gifts - and we can lovingly help them connect with that One Perfect Gift who is the real

reason for this holiday season. Through our patience, our kind words, and our compassionate actions, you and I can share the Good News - that the Holy One *has* come down to earth! This is not a bad or woeful thing; it is the best and most wonderful thing that this world has ever experienced.