Say Yes, Be Ready

Homily for St. John's Episcopal Church by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given December 15, 2024
The Third Sunday of Advent: Luke 3:7-18

One of St. John's best-kept secrets is the amazing, beautiful little service of Tuesday Noon Eucharist (well it's really 12:15) we have every week in the chapel. In that service, we sit in a circle. Instead of a sermon we have a conversation, generally a free-wheeling, wide-ranging, no-holds barred conversation about the scripture of the day. We serve each other Holy Communion in a circle, each one saying to the next person, the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven. Instead of scripted prayers of the people we just name the people and situations we want to pray about. Some of those who attend usually go for a walk around Lake Harriet afterward. Everyone is invited. I hope you all will experience it one day.

In this past week, we read the gospel reading you just heard from Rex, and then we talked about it. Peter Stebinger noticed that there seemed to be two John the Baptists – one who obviously flunked pastoral care 101 and the other who was saying something really simple, really profound, and even reassuring. On the one hand, John talks about winnowing the chaff from the wheat and burning the chaff in unquenchable fire, and calls the people "broods of vipers." Ouch. On the other hand, he says, it really is simple. If you have two coats, give one to someone who doesn't have any. If you have extra food, do likewise. He tells soldiers and tax collectors not to use their position to take advantage of the vulnerable; not to abuse their power. These things are actually

doable. They are within our reach. In fact in a way John the Baptizer's message was as simple as those in that old book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Remember it? The author of that book says the essential credo of kindergarten is this:

> To be fair, we must share.
> Don't hit people.
> Clean up your own mess; put things back where you found them.
> Don't take what's not yours.
> Wash your hands.
> Hold hands, stick together.

Even though these ideas are not new—they are as old as time—John the Baptist's message was obviously powerful to the people of his day. They came out in droves to the wilderness, where he had spent his life eating and wearing what the land provided, to be baptized by him. Their hearts were even filled with expectation, wondering if he was the Messiah. He was not. But he was the one who gets the people ready for the Messiah. How he does that is to point out how important it is that we change our lives; and then, in a way, to invite people to open themselves to something larger and bigger and more important than just knowing what the right thing to do is. To actually *do* the right thing, we need something more. We need more than a ritual like baptism with water, that provides a symbolic representation of our intention, as powerful as that is. the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire, he says. We need the transformation that comes from Spirit. If you think about fire, it's the one energy that can actually transmute a substance from one thing to another. That kind of transformation is what Jesus brought.

To illustrate this point, I of course know what the message of John the Baptist is. I am a priest. But you know what is ironic? Like I said, this past Tuesday at noon Eucharist we were discussing John the Baptist's message. And suddenly, during our conversation, I got goosebumps. On my commute to church that morning I had been wearing a coat in my car, but I also had another coat in the back seat that I keep there as part of a winter emergency package. I was running late to get to church. On Nicollet and 35th Street which is on my route to church, I passed a man who was standing in the cold with a sign up asking for help of any kind. And even though I had an extra coat in the back seat, I passed him by. I was in a hurry. I had two coats, but I didn't give one to the person who was cold. I didn't stop to talk with him. In fact there are often people there at that corner and I pass them by often. And I'm sure we all do this all the time.

So it got me thinking. I don't think God is calling us literally to stop, everytime we see someone in need—or, *are* we supposed to do that? Now I'm not generally a biblical literalist, but that coincidence seemed too synchronistic to ignore, so I've been thinking about it all week. I've been asking myself what kind of transformation the Holy Spirit is inviting in me, here is what came to me. First, I could do something as simple as keeping things in the car to offer people in need, and I have in fact decided to do that. At the moment that looks like bus cards or cash, socks, mittens and a handwritten note. Right now these are in a gift bag my glove compartment waiting for the next person I see. Now I know there is a debate about whether or not to give money to people who ask for it, and then there is the whole debate about advocacy versus service,

and certainly we are called to do things that would prevent people from being homeless in the first place. I also know that if we were to stop every single time we saw people in need it might radically change our lives. Hmm. What feels true to me today is that I'm being invited to be willing to do two things: say yes, and be ready.

Say yes to what? For me it's about something I've been feeling already anyway. It's about stepping forward into a life that is truly and permanently oriented toward the welfare of the whole. And really, all that means is to say yes to what is already true: we are all connected, and our welfare is bound together. Life is complicated, but actually it really is simple. On Jesus' Way of Love, we are called to love God, love our neighbors as ourselves. That's it. It's true that there is discernment involved. We are not called to do all things for all people. That is unsustainable and not even helpful. But it seems to me the final step in human consciousness, in human development, is about giving it all away. We are all born and we all die. In between those things we have joy and pain, love and loss. When we die we take nothing with us but our true selves, our souls. So what joy there can be in saying yes now, to keeping it simple. Say yes to generosity. Say yes to believing there is enough and that we do not need to hoard. Say yes to the joy of contributing to the welfare of others. Say yes to paying keen attention to those around you.

And second, be ready. Like I said earlier, if you go down the path of being willing to be interrupted to attend to what comes before your path, like the Good Samaritan, then you will no longer have the illusion of control in your life, but you *can* do some things to prepare. So, this week I've been thinking, am I really going to stop every time I see this person on the

corner? I'll always need to keep something in my car. Then I got to thinking, actually I'll need to do more than that – I'll need enough time to stop. So that means I have to plan ahead. I will admit I am very German, I'm usually on a tight schedule. But now I'm going to need to leave fifteen minutes early so I have time to offer something to someone in need. But then I'll need to structure my day differently in general. And one thing leads to another, and it goes on and on. I can keep things in my car, and maybe I could even have conversations with these folks, get to know them. Maybe I could even have a relationship with them.

So for me, this person standing on the street corner, in addition to being a beautiful child of God, is also a reminder to me of this larger commitment that goes way past keeping stuff in my car. This person is a reminder that I am committing to being oriented toward the welfare of the whole. I can be ready by opening my heart to greater flexibility about time and listening to the Spirit about what is called for from me in any given moment. I can be ready by prioritizing nourishing myself so that I am not exhausted and worn out and reactive, like I too often I am. I can practice a theology of "enough" so that I tend to what I really need and let go of the rest.

Once you start going down this road, simply committing to share your extra coat and food with people in need, and listening to what that looks like in your own unique world, it can change your whole life. And maybe that is the point. I can see John the Baptist smiling now, saying, now you get it. Amen.