

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

December 13, 2015; the 3rd Sunday of Advent

Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9, The First Song of Isaiah, Isaiah 12:2-16; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18.

The Costly Grace of John the Baptist

We are getting close to Christmas, and many of us are sending and receiving Christmas cards, and every year I think, what would it be like to send out a card with John the Baptist on the cover, with a little bubble coming out of his mouth saying, "Repent, you brood of vipers!"

That probably wouldn't go over so well.

After all, what would people think?

What does John the Baptist have to do with Christmas?

Just as someone who is not familiar with our lectionary, who is visiting an Episcopal Church today, might wonder what we are doing focusing on John the Baptist, just 12 days before Christmas.

After all, by the time John was an adult, so was Jesus; it seems out of step, chronologically, and it is.

But theologically, we are right where we need to be with John the Baptist, preparing for the Advent of Jesus, Jesus' 1st Advent, Christmas and his 2nd Advent, usually called the Second Coming, and I like to add, the coming of Jesus, the Christ, into our lives again and again.

John the Baptist helps us as we continue to prepare our hearts for God.

Let's consider what John is saying.

He reminds me of Jonah, who was so angry that God was going to forgive the people of Nineveh.

Remember, Jonah, who went off pouting, sat under a bush, and told God

that he would rather die than watch God forgive those terrible people of Nineveh.

John the Baptist has a similar sort of righteous anger; John told the people to repent and be baptized so as to prepare the way of the Lord, and what do you know, they listened and came to John, a whole crowd.

But when they show up, John questions them, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Well, you, John.

But even so, John is not satisfied, just showing up is not enough.

Listen to John’s greeting again from another translation, that of *The Message Remix*, the 2nd edition of Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible.

“When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: ‘Brood of snakes!

What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river?

Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment?

It’s your life that must change, not your skin’.”¹

Was John the Baptist glad that the people were there?

On some level, probably, but he wanted more from them.

We know the saying that “showing up is 80% of life, or of success” often attributed to Woody Allen.

It is that other 20% that makes all the difference.

John the Baptist was not interested in people having “cheap grace.”

¹ Eugene H. Peterson. *The Message Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 2003, p. 1834 of 2232.

“Cheap grace” was what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote of saying, “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has.....

Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*.

Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*.

Costly grace is the sanctuary of God.”²

Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, ethicist, teacher, whose call to follow Jesus led to his execution by the Nazis during WWII.

Few of us are called to such costly grace, but we are called to costly grace in some way; the grace is costly because we usually have to do something that is sacrificial or challenging or new or surprising because we follow the way of Jesus.

Just as we cannot get to Easter without going through Good Friday, we cannot get to Christmas without going through John the Baptist.

As Kathy Beach-Verhey puts it, “There is no getting to Bethlehem and the sweet baby in the manger without first hearing the rough prophet in the wilderness call us to repentance.”³

John the Baptist invites us to go out into the desert place, into the wilderness in Advent to consider what we believe and how our belief informs, shapes, and guides our lives...what do we really want, what do we choose.

When the people were told by John the Baptist that they must bear fruit

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995, 44-45 of 304. First published in English, 1959; first published in German, 1937. Italics his.

³ David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1: Advent Through Transfiguration*. Kathy Beach-Verhey, Third Sunday of Advent, Luke, Homiletical Perspective, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press Epub, 2009, Loc 2660 - 2670 of 16192.

worthy of repentance, they asked what they should do.

John did not tell them to give up everything and live with him in the wilderness forever, but that if they had two coats, they needed to give one away, and that they should also share their food.

To tax collectors and soldiers, he said, be fair.

This sort of sharing, and treating people fairly and equally, is what we call social justice today.

How does a church community live into costly grace and refuse cheap grace?

We do so every time that we stand with those who need our help, our support...be that by hosting the World AIDS Day service as we did this year, and the Holiday Memorial Service...that service for those who have lost a child, being willing to be with people in their grief, there is a lot of grace in that and it is not cheap for anyone.

Holding our Food Pantry four times a month, our community meal once a month, having our Christ Family program, helping children in Mzula in

Tanzania, Veterans' Meal Ministry, and I could go on.

In all our Outreach and Pastoral Care programs, even more than the money we put into such efforts to help, it is ourselves that we offer, it is our hearts that we open, and there is a cost to that...even as grace abounds.

It is right that this week we are sharing our church with people who are finding shelter with us this week through the CARITAS program.

On the CARITAS website we learn:

“Homelessness isn't a lifestyle, it's an emergency.

On any given night about 1,000 people in the greater Richmond area are experiencing homelessness. and for many, CARITAS was the only place they could turn.

CARITAS is Richmond's largest emergency shelter, sheltering up to 110 people per night.

We provide over 90% of the shelter beds available to single women.

The hard work of 15,000 volunteers and 155 host congregations creates a safe and hospitable place for our most vulnerable citizens.

Upon entering CARITAS, guests find not only the necessities for survival -- they find the tools for success.

Through the growing web of CARITAS volunteers, staff, and agency partners, guests get the help they need to get off the street, back on their feet, and on the path to self-sufficiency.

But none of this can be done without your help.

CARITAS needs your support, and together, we can bring an end to homelessness in our city and restore productive, healthy lives.”⁴

“None of this can be done without your help.”

I can hear God saying that to us.

We are awake and we are preparing to celebrate a day of great joy...when God came to us in Jesus, the Christ, as a baby, to grow and live among us...to give us the grace and the guidance and the resources we would need, to live into our baptisms.

When we open our hearts to the most vulnerable in our lives, our city, our region, our world, we are opening our hearts to the vulnerable baby Jesus to be born in us again this year. Amen.

⁴ <http://caritasva.org/shelter.html> CARITAS is Latin meaning, can be translated as, 'love of humanity' or 'charity'