

**The Third Church Pulpit**  
Sermons from Third Presbyterian Church  
Rochester, New York

**“John’s Story, Part II”**

John Wilkinson

December 16, 2018



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Presbyterian  
Church**

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Third Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:7–18

We spent much of yesterday in the car, driving around doing errands, delivering our Third Church Christmas basket, obtaining our Christmas tree from Troop 31, shopping, etc., etc. In the background, whether in the car or at home, was a continual soundtrack of Christmas music, some sacred, some secular. “Hark how the bells, sweet Christmas bells.” “Come, they told me.” “Have a holly, jolly Christmas.” “Here comes Santa Claus, here comes Santa Claus.” Mariah Carey belting “All I want for Christmas is you.” And so many more. It was enough to put us in a festive mood, even a joyful, hopeful mood. And here comes John the Baptist to burst the bubble. “You brood of vipers,” he calls his audience. Crowds are following him, many of them wanting to be baptized by him. John must not have received the memo from the committee, the friendly, don’t alienate your audience committee. Rather than nurturing language, welcoming language, hospitable language he lays into the crowd. “You brood of vipers,” and he follows by telling them to bear good fruit, to repent, to be ready to be cut down like a tree unless their lives demonstrated the Spirit, ethical behavior. They had a choice. Live a life of faith or be treated like the chaff and tossed aside to be burned while the good wheat is used to make bread. We have a choice. We can reject what John says. We can ignore what John says. Or we can accept what he says, take his message seriously, even in the face of its harshness and its seeming inconsistency with the faith we profess. How can we sing “It’s the most wonderful time of the year” when this man, this so-called prophet, is raving against us? Rather, how can we not? That is to say, when we met John last week, we affirmed our mutual call to be prophets and messengers. This is the difficult, risk-taking, gratifying call to tell the truth. To tell the truth when we see it, whether it be in our own lives or the life of the church or world. We would rather

ignore hard truths, or suppress them, or deemphasize them. But I had a mechanic tell me once that ignoring a noise in the engine won't make it go away, that a car won't fix itself. Neither can we fix ourselves without repentance. Neither can the world fix itself without someone, or some community, holding up the mirror and reflecting back what is, and offering an alternative. Peace rather than war. Abundance rather than scarcity. Hope rather than despair, love rather than hate. Life, life rather than death. That is the prophetic task, left not just to those on the fringes, but to all of us. It is about taking stock of our own lives. Karoline Lewis writes that "While we would like to imagine ourselves as altruistic and inherently generous, the truth is we might have a higher opinion of ourselves than what John the Baptist appears to see." And it is about taking stock of the life of the world, to look around and to identify, with urgency, what is wrong, what is missing. Judith Jones writes that "John calls his hearers to let God burn up our selfish desire to hoard our food and clothes even when our neighbor is hungry and shivering with cold." As we pivot in these days toward Bethlehem, as we travel through Advent, I want to make a case for John, a case for truth-telling, a case to be open to the prophetic as we live our lives and as we seek to make a difference in the world. It is counter-cultural work. It is not popularity-contest winning work, calling any group a brood of vipers. Perhaps our tactics will not be John's. But our calling is. David Lose asks "...what might happen if we pledged that in light of the dangerous world we live in we intended to redouble our efforts to be honest, kind, and hardworking, meeting the needs of those around us, reaching out to help those who struggle, and in all these ways witness to our confidence that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection make a difference?" And when we do, I would say, we move not farther from the Christmas spirit, but ever more deeply into it. The packages we give and receive, the words we exchange, the bread we break, even the music we enjoy, will be ever more authentic, when we remember and claim our calling, like John did, to be a prophet and a messenger of the deepest and truest meanings of this season.



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