

What Then Should We Do?

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“What then should we do?”

That question, from our Gospel reading today, literally leaps across the centuries, right out of the pages of Luke’s Gospel, and right into our hearts and minds and actions on this thirteenth day of December of 2009.

In the Gospel story, John the Baptist is warning people to flee from the wrath that is to come, John is warning people to prepare for judgment. “The One who is mightier than I is coming,” John says, “and when he comes, he will bring fire, he will cut down the trees and burn up those that do not bear good fruit; he will gather in the grain, but the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out.” John paints a very dire picture—and it is in response to that picture that the people ask, “What then should we do?” If things are going to be that *bad*, if the judgment is going to be that strict and severe, then what must we do to be on the *good* side, what must we do to survive? What then should we do to be doing what God would have us do in the time we have to do it? The people’s question is not an idle speculation or an academic exercise in comparative ethics—it is a question of urgency, it is a question of immediacy, it is a question of life and death.

And that question comes before us, today, as well. What then should *we* do? In a world of injustice and oppression and violence; in a world where the gap between the haves and the have-nots seems to be growing and growing and growing; in a world where more and more people—even people, *especially* people, in the affluent, wealthy, developed world—seem to be feeling lost and isolated and alone, without purpose and direction in life, and there seems to be no one to bring to them good news; in a world like our world, what then should we do to be doing what God would have us do in this time we have to do it? That question, for us too, is not just an idle speculation or an ethical exercise or an interesting sermon topic—that question, for us too, is a matter of urgency and immediacy and life and death.

For that reason, John’s *answer* to the question in the Gospel today can speak loud and clear and powerfully to us. And what strikes me about John’s answer is that, when it comes right down to it, it’s really *very simple*. Here John is, talking about the end of the age and the apocalyptic judgment and the coming of the Mighty One who will bring destroying and purifying fire—and yet when people ask him what to do to respond to that apocalyptic judgment, John answers in very ordinary, down-to-earth, everyday terms.

People say, “What should we do?” and John says, “Share what you have. If you have food or clothing or anything else you need to support a decent life, make sure that other people around you have it too.” That hardly sounds outrageous, or judgmental, or apocalyptic. That sounds pretty simple, pretty basic, pretty down-to-earth.

Tax collectors say, “What should we do?” and John says, “Collect what you have coming to you. Don’t abuse your position to take more from your neighbors than they have to give.” That hardly sounds outrageous, or judgmental, or apocalyptic. That sounds pretty simple, pretty basic, pretty down-to-earth.

Soldiers say, “What should we do?” and John says, “Don’t extort or threaten people. Don’t abuse your power to overpower others, but *empower* them so you all can live peaceably together.” That hardly sounds outrageous, or judgmental, or apocalyptic. That sounds pretty simple, pretty basic, pretty down-to-earth.

John's responses to the question, "What then should we do?" are *simple*—but that doesn't mean that they are *easy*. In fact, they're pretty challenging. For the people, sharing what they had was a challenge, when they lived with a mindset of scarcity, with the mindset of a conquered people, that said "It's a rough world out there, and if you don't hold on to what we have, if you don't look out for yourself first, somebody else could come and take it away, and then you'll end up having nothing at all—so don't share." For the tax collectors, collecting only their appointed fees was a challenge, when Roman law allowed them and even *encouraged* them to collect extra and skim the top for themselves and become rich collaborators with Rome at the expense of their impoverished neighbors—that was a technique Rome had for breaking the spirit of the conquered people and keeping them well under the Roman thumb. For the soldiers, not abusing their power and being satisfied with their wages was a challenge, when their wages were really very low, and they were encouraged to commandeer their daily needs from the subjugated population—which was another way of breaking the people's spirit and keeping them in line for Rome. For all of these people who ask the question of John, John's answers are pretty challenging, John's answers are *simple* but not *easy*. For all of them, following John's teaching means engaging their ordinary circumstances in an extraordinary way—it means doing what is down to earth, but doing it in a way that is filled with the grace of heaven.

And I think that is the part of the Gospel that really speaks to us. The Good News that John the Baptist speaks across the centuries to us today is that what *we* should do is engage our ordinary circumstances in an extraordinary way—what *we* should do is do what is down to earth, but do it in a way that is filled with the grace of heaven.

And for us, too, that is *simple*—but it is hardly *easy*. Sometimes I think it would be easier if the Gospel did demand outrageous and judgmental and apocalyptic things of us—demand that we give up everything we have and go out to the desert and live as hermits; demand that we turn our backs on the world and live in our own enclaves of holiness and purity; demand that we reject and condemn everything that does not fit *our* idea of what is spiritual and righteous and holy and good. Sometimes it seems easier to do the big grand gesture once for all, than to live continuously in the little, ordinary ways that come together to make a really godly life. But that is what the Gospel calls us to do: to share what we have; not to take more than our neighbors can give; not to overpower others but to empower all; to let our gentleness be known to everyone, absolutely everyone, no exceptions; to let the peace of God keep our hearts and minds focused in Christ Jesus and his love for everyone; to live ordinary lives in an extraordinary way; to do what's down to earth and do it with the grace of heaven. The Good News of the Gospel for us today is a call to live a *whole life*, and to help others live whole lives, not just in a future world on the far side of judgment, but here and now, in the jobs and occupations and actions we have, in the relationships and connections and families we share, in the economic and political and social decisions we make, in all the extraordinary graces that open up in ordinary life.

What then should we do? We should pray to God, that God's bountiful grace and mercy should speedily help and deliver us—and we should live out that prayer in help and deliverance for God's world. May it be so for us. Amen.