

*A NEW WORD*  
Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church  
in Brookfield, Connecticut  
on December 15, 2021

Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" *Merry Christmas!* That's how a pastor friend of mine once described what it's like to lead worship on the third Sunday of Advent. This Sunday is traditionally known as Gaudete

Sunday. In Latin, "Gaudete" means "rejoice." Advent is a season of waiting, and today we're called to be joyful as we await the coming of Christ.

It's easy to see the joy in the first reading this morning. Isaiah is talking about how God was there for God's people in the past, is there for them in the present, and will be there for them in the future, and he tells his audience to "shout aloud and sing for joy" because of God's steady presence in their lives.

It's a little tougher, however, as my pastor friend was noting, to see the joy in the second reading. John the Baptist is out there in the wilderness yelling at people and calling them names. Where's the joy in that?

I used to ask myself that question every year during Advent. And then one year I read a book by Walter Brueggemann that didn't actually have anything to do with Advent. It was about preaching. But it gave me a different way of understanding this passage. In that book, Brueggemann describes preaching in an interesting way. He describes it as a word that comes from outside whatever situation or condition it's addressing, and what that word from the outside does is bring fresh perspective. It challenges people's assumptions about the world they know (or think they know). It tells people who are living in one kind of captivity or another that there are possibilities for their lives they haven't even considered.

That's the whole reason why we come to church, according to Brueggemann—to have our mental walls torn down so we can see beyond them, so we can have our horizons expanded. In his words:

"We show up to listen, waiting and half expecting that there will be a new word. We most often have not thought this through when we show up. But if we had thought it through, we would likely recognize our sneaking hunch that we cannot stay human if we attempt to live in a closed system of reality that is sealed against new intervention from the outside. We reach out, in fear and hope, to be addressed by newness, because we know the human spirit will wither if there is no address."<sup>1</sup>

So preaching—good preaching, faithful preaching—tells us there's more to life than we have yet imagined, and that's like being in a stuffy little room where there's barely enough oxygen, and suddenly a window is flung wide open, and a blast of fresh air comes in. It revives us. It gives us hope. It makes us feel joyful.

But here's the thing. Some people get used to being in a stuffy little room, and they even grow to like it. They adjust to the stale air and the cramped quarters, and they don't want the window open. They don't want to let the outside air in. To them it just feels cold and drafty.

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 3.

That's the kind of people John is preaching to out in the wilderness. He's trying to open a window and let some fresh air into their lives, but they want keep the window shut. He's telling them there's a reality beyond the world they know, but they've gotten used to the way things are, even though they're suffocating. So John has to use a little extra force to address them. He has to speak in a way that breaks through the closed system of reality they're living in so they can see how much they're missing.

"You brood of vipers!" he yells, which is an interesting choice of words. He doesn't say, "You vipers." He says, "You brood of vipers"—you offspring of vipers, you generation of vipers. Because he's not talking to people as individuals. He's speaking to the times they live in, the present arrangement of things, what life in Israel has become under the Romans—the selfishness, the cruelty, the injustice that seems to be everywhere.

And John doesn't buy the excuse that because they're God's people that somehow gets them off the hook. *God doesn't care that you're descended from Abraham*, he tells them. *The faithfulness of your ancestors doesn't make you special in God's eyes. God can call anyone to be God's people, even these rocks laying on the ground. Right now, in fact, at this very moment, the axe is lying at the root of your family tree, and God is about to cut ties with you—you who've drifted away from God, you who've forgotten God's ways.*

So there's no getting around this indictment, there's no wiggling out of this judgement, and once people see that, all of a sudden they change their tune. "What then should we do?" they ask, and John gives them a few examples of how they can change their ways and return to God rather than continuing to participate in the life of the Empire. And it's pretty basic stuff. *You tax collectors, stop cheating people and bleeding them dry. You soldiers, stop extorting people and threatening them with harm. And all of you, have a little compassion for the poor. Show some mercy. If someone needs something, give it to them. Share what you have.*

It's sad that any grown person would have to be told these things, but it just goes to show how captive the people in this reading are to the times they live in. So John does what good, faithful preachers are supposed to do: he opens a window and lets in fresh air; he brings them a new word, a new intervention from the outside. He tells them, in Brueggemann's words, that the world is "other than they have thought it":

"I baptize you with water," John says, "but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

That's the good news John proclaims, though it may not sound very good when you first hear it. It may sound pretty scary, in fact. But I think that's on purpose because John is trying to jar people into really looking at themselves and the situation they've become captive to. He's trying to get people to hear the message that there's a bigger story than the one they're living in. There's a bigger story than the one Rome is telling, where the weak get trampled, and the vulnerable are exploited, and that's just how it is.

And the bigger story he's talking about is a story of judgment, yes, but also redemption. It's a story of God taking what's wrong with the present arrangement of things and making it right. It's a story of God taking what life has become and making it what life is meant to be. And that's why today is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday. Because no matter what story the world is telling us, and no matter how captive we may be to the times we live in, today we hear a new word from the outside: the world is other than we have thought it, and there's more to life than we have yet imagined.

So shout aloud and sing for joy, like Isaiah says, for great in our midst is the Holy One of Israel. (And merry Christmas!) Amen.