

Come, Spirit of the living God, and take up your place our hearts.

Our theme for Advent this year has been "Making Room for Jesus."
Because we have to make room for this life of God that Jesus has brought
into the world, for the Life of God in our selves and in our surroundings.
Today we focus on making room for justice... because that won't happen either
if we try to squeeze it into the cracks and crannies of our busy lives.

Thursday we hosted for the sixth time the National Homeless Memorial Day
observance in Charles County, and once again it was a powerful service,
with music and readings, a strong message from Aleata Dawkins,
who works at our county Department of Social Services.

The emotional center of that service is reading the names of those who died
homeless in our community this past year, as we light a candle for each one,
the light representing their light that is no longer among us.

Once again I felt inspired to invite us to go beyond trying to meet the needs
of people who are unhoused to advocating for an end to homelessness
in our region. I said that, in addition to people who can care for those in need,
we need advocates, people who feel a passion to speak to legislators and go
around speaking in churches and civic organizations, to raise awareness and
inspire a commitment to ending this intolerable – yet tolerated – situation.

When we can no longer stomach knowing that our neighbors and their children
are living in cars or in the woods or in motel rooms, we will end homelessness.
We have the funding in our pockets, if not in our government coffers.

But even as I spoke, I know I said something similar last year and the year before,
and I had done nothing in the intervening months to move us toward that goal.
I'm not sure anyone else had either. Why?

Because I feel a passion for justice, but I have not made room for it.

I spend more time on church things than on justice issues – more gratifying by far.

A scan of the news is enough to make me say, "Why bother? There is no justice."

But that just means I'm going about it wrong.

Being active in God's mission is not meant to be frustrating.

If there's more fatigue and frustration than joy and energy, that is a sign
that we're trying to do it on our own steam, our own strength.

God's justice is just that: God's. We are to work for justice – but not alone.

We are to work with God for justice, and that means the outcome is already set. The more we work, the sooner we get to see it, but God has already declared that the day of justice will come, and all that is wrong will be made right, and all that has been taken will be restored, and all who have been hurt and killed and stolen from will be made whole. That outcome is already accomplished in God's sight; we help the world live into that future God has already achieved in Christ.

We work for justice with God, not for God; with the Spirit, not on our own. John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit – from before birth – remember the way he belly-flopped in Elizabeth when the pregnant Mary entered the room? John's commitment to justice ultimately got him killed, but his energy to proclaim the coming of God's Messiah never flagged. He pursued justice in the power of the Holy Spirit; so can we.

For two weeks every December the church invites John the Baptist to roam the wilderness of our lives – our kitchens, offices, roadways, our domesticated religion – to remind us about our sins, and greed and humility and justice, and repentance, which means turning our lives to God. American Christianity often focuses on personal sin – chiefly what we do with our bodies. There is little emphasis on societal sin, how we wield power and hoard money and resources, resist leveling our playing fields. But when John the Baptist, whose invitation to repent and return to the life of God was so compelling people flocking into that river for a ritual cleansing; when people asked how they were meant to alter their lives in response to this repentance, he did not talk about sexuality or crime. He talked about greed and abuse of power. He talked about society-level sin – and friends, we're all complicit in that.

It is said of preachers, and prophets, that their job is to “comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.” That's the path John the Baptist forged. John's mission, remember, was to “make ready a people prepared for their Lord.” People, get ready! Repent! And there must have been something really amazing about John, that he drew such crowds despite such a harsh message. Some took it to heart, asking, “What can I do?” And he had really specific suggestions for them: You got two coats? share with someone who has none. You got extra food? Do likewise.

In other words, when John said to people, “Being sorry isn’t enough – your lives actually have to bear some good fruit,” and when they said, “How?” his answers were all about equity and justice.

We could use us some John the Baptist right about now, but do we want to hear him? John spoke directly to the human tendency to hoard wealth and to abuse power – and he offered the antidote, which is trusting God and giving ourselves away. Bearing fruit worthy of repentance means caring that resources are distributed equally, giving of our plenty to those who have less. Being content with what we have. Being ethical in our business dealings. Bearing fruit worthy of repentance means living your life in such a way that people can tell it’s different. You know that old saw – if you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? That means change of heart, not just adjusting behavior. And it means caring about justice for all – for all – more than caring for ourselves.

This story we are about to celebrate Tuesday night, about the baby and the manger, the shepherds and the angels? This is a story about justice. This is a story about a poor couple forced to travel to a town to be counted so the Romans could exact even more taxes; a couple that could not find a warm place where she could deliver their firstborn until someone offered a stable; a couple that would soon become refugees fleeing a violent government. Those shepherds? The dregs of humanity, is the way they were seen by folks. Yet it was to them that the angels appeared, the first to hear the Great News. Jesus came to bring about God’s justice. That’s what we’ll be celebrating.

As my friend Craig Loya, the bishop of Minnesota wrote this week:
Over the centuries, both the church and the culture have tamed the rough edges of Christmas. We have made it a cozy story rather than a promise to turn things upside down with a revolutionary flood of love... This year, beloved, we are invited to re-wild Christmas in our hearts and our congregations. If we dare to go to the manger, let us commit to living from the manger. Let us commit to being a church that stands with the immigrant, the refugee, and all those targeted by the flex from the centers of power. Let us commit to being a church that lives a story of love across division instead of the story of a zero sum struggle between differing groups. Let us commit to being a church that, small and humble, always bears witness to the small and humble God who is Lord of all.

Will we make room for justice? **Amen.**

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.