



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Dannals, *Interim Rector*

"What Then Should We Do?"

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 13, 2015
The Third Sunday of Advent—Based on Luke 3: 7-18*

I remember being told as a child that human beings were mammals, in our physical nature not primarily different from other complex, warm-blooded creatures. I remember finding this new information very confusing, so clearly had the line been drawn between the animal world and the human... You know, the dog we put out at night, the little brother we keep inside, those sorts of things. We feel kinship with animals. We spend enormous amounts of time and money on our pets and watch countless hours of Animal Planet. But we mark our differences with the animals as well. Consider some of the nasty comments we use to brutalize our human brothers and sisters when comparing them to animals:

... "Were you raised in a barn?" ... "She acts as though she were raised by wolves."
... "He eats like a pig." ... "She laughs like a hyena."

Animals, so loved by most, are also a foil we use to describe ourselves and our supposedly unique and higher nature.

Animals run through our prophetic readings during Advent. John the Baptist seems to have lived in animal-like simplicity, eating locusts and wild honey, clothed in the hair of a camel. And John's displeasure with the Pharisees seems evident in the animal name he calls them: a "brood of vipers." You bunch of snakes, you biting, poisonous, slithering things, he says. You all know a powerful metaphor when you hear it. John was one to remind people of their failures, one to shock them a bit and wake them up with this powerful symbolic language.

The prophet Isaiah speaks in a similar vein. The first metaphor is flora rather than fauna. "A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots." We understand this shoot to be the new thing God has done in Jesus Christ. Isaiah tells us that the Messiah will have a special concern for the poor and that he will not judge by appearances or by reputation, by what his eyes see or by what his ears hear. But by a standard of justice, he will judge for the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

According to Isaiah, the transformative effect of the Messiah on the entire human community is clear, on both rich and poor, just and unjust. He explains in this rich animal metaphor "the wolf shall live with the lamb..." This is of course not a vision of the animal kingdom transformed, of the natural biological relationships between predator and prey being remade. This is again a metaphor, a vision of a transformed human society. Isaiah uses animal imagery to speak God's truth about human relationships.

The wolf shall live with the lamb. The voracious predator shall live with the defenseless prey. There is an old joke about the unholy congregation that prays on its knees on Sunday and preys on other people all week. Isaiah sees that sort of thing ending, as exploitation, oppression, and excessive advantage-seeking come to an end.

Who are the lambs and calves among us ... The marginalized, the victimized, those who are consistently acted upon, those who have lost their voice in our society and those who have never had a place in our society? The biblical narrative simply tags them "widows and orphans," those who have been abandoned by their caregivers. In our day, they are children born in extreme poverty who will never even have a vision, not even a glimmering of what it might

mean for them to transcend the limitations and the poverty of their current situation. The hundreds of millions of people born in the crushing poverty of the developing world, those raised in countries where war and terrorism strike in front of their eyes, those in places where hard work and luck have no currency. Are not these the prey Isaiah and John the Baptist see?

And who are the predators ... the wolves, the bears, the adders? Perhaps those who profit unjustly from the misfortune of others. Perhaps it is I when I quietly diminish some aspect of God's world by secret prejudices or disregard. Perhaps it is a presidential candidate who thinks the one in the Oval Office can categorically bar a whole religion from being part of our country. Perhaps it is one class of people who quietly live above the fray, not even noticing those who are digging and scrapping for survival. Perhaps it is a quiet majority not speaking up when war-torn Syrians can't find a haven of safety and hospitality. Perhaps ...

But living in a constant state of benign neglect, or regret, or quiet guilt, or blatant disregard is no way to advance the ambitious vision of Advent. John the Baptist anticipated Jesus in his call to take time to repent, which is a way of saying, "Re-think, re-do, re-orient, turn in a new direction and make your life count."

And when pressed in our gospel text about how to act on repentance, he turned lovingly practical. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." In short, John was saying that "bearing fruit worthy of repentance" is summarized in three actions: SHARE, FAIR and CARE.

The first thing John says we should do to bear good fruit is to share.

A sure sign that one has repented is her/his ability to share goods, knowledge, and resources with others. Certainly John meant by sharing the very simple and literal gesture of sharing clothing and food. But on a more profound and costly level, the message speaks to the very difficult but needed effort of the "redistribution of wealth."

The second aspect John states about bearing good fruit is to be fair.

"Collect no more than is appointed you..." That is, don't exploit people. It means a fair tax system, a just economic enterprise, fair business practices.

A third object lesson has to do with the general way we treat others. Addressing soldiers, John says, "Do not rob others, don't exercise needless violence, do not falsely accuse others or intimidate your neighbor." In the words of the Prayer Book, to do the work of repentance "we are to care for young and old alike, rich and poor alike, black and white alike, southern and northern alike..." (that last clause is not included).

Soon after I arrived in Dallas to be the Rector of Saint Michael and All Angels, I was asked to provide the invocation at an awards ceremony. It was a celebration of those who had done something to change the world. What I discovered among the recipients was a profound sense of passion—the same kind that John the Baptist is talking about. One of them was Somaly Mam, who has spent years getting girls and young women out of sex slavery in Asia, even buying them if she has to, and working to heal and redeem them in the midst of a community that will love them back into wholeness. In that unexpected place—the downtown civic center—and among unexpected people—mostly religiously dis-interested people—there were those producing good fruit.

What fruit will you bear this Advent? What fruit will I bear this season? "What then should we do?" they asked. John replied: "Share, be fair, and care."