

3rd Sunday of Advent, C

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“What should we do?” That’s what the crowds ask John the Baptist in today’s gospel. They ask about the treatment that will begin to heal the hurt in their lives and the world. It has been a familiar question in my life, and I will bet it has been in your life too.

I wonder how many times you and I have asked that question throughout our lives. I will bet it is a question you have asked over and over. I have. I started asking about it in childhood and continue to ask about it today. It is not a question we ask only once. And it is not a question that is answered once and forever.

I asked it when I was thinking about my future, making decisions, and trying to grow up.

I asked it when I was in over my head and life was overwhelming. I have asked it when a relationship got difficult and painful. I have asked it when I had messed up and didn’t know where or how to begin cleaning up the mess. I have asked it when grief and loss broke my heart, when dreams were shattered, and when I was scared. I have asked it when I was inspired, excited, and passionate about a new interest, a sense of calling, or a long-awaited opportunity. I have asked it every time I came to a transition in my life regardless of how I got there.

“What should we do?” When was that your question and what caused you to ask it? In what ways is it your question today? And what’s behind it?

“What should we do?” is a question that opens something within us. It is a reminder that life is always unfolding before us. It is a step on the journey of uncovering, discovering, or recovering ourselves.

I have come to realize that when I ask that question, I am not just looking for information, I am looking for myself. It is not just a question about what I should do, but about who I am and how I want to be. And I think that’s what is going on with the crowds who ask John, **“What should we do?”**

Here is why I say that. If we look a few verses earlier, we will see that John has just called the crowds **“you brood of vipers”** and told them to **“produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance.”**

Anticipating their next move, he tells them not even to begin defending, excusing, and justifying themselves by claiming, **“We have Abraham as our father.”**

John is anything but indifferent to the crowds. He is angry with love and concern for them. It is like a parent’s anger at the little child who runs away in a shopping center or rides his or her bike into the street.

John is not rejecting Abraham’s legacy. He is making a distinction. Abraham’s legacy is not a fixed path to be followed. It is a light that illumines the crowds’ path of life. Abraham’s legacy is not a lifetime

guarantee. It is a promise that they do not walk that path alone. They do, however, must walk the path of life for themselves. Abraham cannot walk it for them. That's also true for you and me.

John is turning up the heat, holding up the mirror, and closing the exits. That's when the crowds ask, **“What should we do?”** It is as if they are saying, **“If we cannot do what we have always done; if we cannot stand behind Abraham; if we cannot make him responsible; we don't know what to do. We have never done it any other way. We don't know who we are apart from Abraham. We have never taken responsibility for ourselves, who we are, or how we want to be. What should we do?”**

Their question isn't about a lack of information. It is a symptom that they lack themselves. It is a confession that things are going all that great. They have lost themselves. Their lives have become untied from their deepest self, the **“one who is more powerful.”** Their question is less about what they should do and more about who and how they want to be.

What is the self from which you are living today? That's the unspoken question in today's gospel. And is it really you, who you want to be, and how you want to be, or is it someone or something else? Who or what is Abraham in your life today? Are you living your life or someone else's? And what is connecting you to the **“one who is more powerful?”**

Every time we lose a piece of ourselves and latch on to some Abraham we descend into a valley, climb a mountain, walk a crooked path, or stumble over rough ground, and it hurts. It hurts us and it hurts others.

“What should we do?” Maybe there is a better question. Maybe the better question is, **“How then do we want to be?”** And maybe that’s not even a better question. Maybe it is just the prior question.

If we get the **“how”** of our lives worked out the **“what”** follows naturally. If we know how we want to be, the values we hold, the qualities we embody, what we are living for, and what we are willing to die for, we will know what to do.

It will be as simple and obvious as a person who has two coats sharing with someone who has none, as being a tax collector and taking no more than the amount prescribed, as being a soldier and not extorting money by threats and false accusations.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It will be that simple and obvious. And it will be that difficult.

“How then do you and I want to be?”

That is not a question to be answered. It is a question to be lived.

Amen.