



---

# The Door Is Open

---



A Sermon By  
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 13, 2015

Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon is available at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015-12-13-AWW.mp3>.

## **The Door Is Open**

Luke 3:7-18

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter  
Grace Episcopal Church  
The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 13, 2015

*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.*

A long time ago, in a decade far, far away, a young filmmaker by the name of George Lucas wrote a story called *Star Wars*.

For those who may not know, *Star Wars* centers around the character of Anakin Skywalker, a small boy who has great power with the Force, the energy field binding the galaxy together. It is believed Anakin will bring balance to the Force, so he is trained to become a Jedi Knight, a guardian of peace and justice, but as Anakin gets older, he is seduced by the dark side of the Force. Fueled by fear, and guilt, and anger, Anakin turns his back on his training; he betrays his friends, killing all the Jedi; and, he is transformed from an agent of good into an agent of evil. Anakin Skywalker becomes Darth Vader.

Years later, while Darth Vader and his master, the evil Emperor, have a stranglehold over the galaxy, a new hope arrives. Anakin Skywalker's son, Luke, reaches adulthood and is trained as a Jedi knight. Luke must confront Darth Vader, and in doing so, causes Vader to think about who he is. Luke believes his father still has some good left inside, and he calls his father back to that way of life, back to what is good and true and right. Luke's presence makes Darth Vader look inside himself and ask: Who am I? Am I Darth Vader? Or, am I Anakin Skywalker? And, in a climactic scene, with Luke's life hanging in the balance, he must answer those questions.

*Star Wars* is undoubtedly the most successful movie franchise in history. Later this week, the 7<sup>th</sup> installment will be released, and fans are already forming lines at movie theaters around the country. On Thursday night, I am taking my 24-year-old son and half a dozen of his best friends to the 10:00 p.m. showing in Silver Spring. And soon, children of all ages will once again dream of being Hans Solo or Princess Leia, Luke Skywalker, or even the Jedi master, himself: Yoda.

On the other hand, very few people will dream of being Darth Vader, and understandably so. None of us want to be the bad guy, and Darth Vader is not a nice person. Yet, I wonder if we don't have some things in common with Darth Vader.

At some point in our lives, we all question what we were taught and how we were raised. As we search for our own identity, we wrestle with good and bad, right and wrong. We often see this in teenagers and young adults who test family boundaries and rebel against their parents. Teenagers don't always study as hard as their parents would like. They stay out late on a Friday night and forget to call home. Parents go away for the weekend, leaving the teenagers in charge of the house, and as soon as the parents are out the door, it's party time.

To parents, this behavior can be maddening and overwhelming. Our child who was so good and sweet and innocent is turning to the dark side – it's like they are becoming Darth Vader – and we don't know what to do. But, that child is only trying to find their place in the world and discover who they are.

Nations often face the same struggles at key moments in their history, as circumstances force citizens to ask themselves about the kind of people they want to be. In this country, we saw it happen during the Revolutionary period, and the Civil War, the 1960's and the Civil Rights Movement. During those critical times, the generations that came before us argued and protested, marched and fought for the heart and soul of America. They wrestled with what it meant to be the home of the free and the land of the brave where all men are created equal and have the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. They forced this country to look into the mirror and ask those all-important questions: Who are we? What is America?

It feels like we are at another such moment right now.

Three years ago tomorrow, Adam Lanza walked into the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, killing 20 children and 6 adults, and yet, since that time, nothing much has changed. We still have mass shootings everyday. In 2015 alone, there have been over 350 mass shootings in which 4 or more people were killed,<sup>1</sup> the most recent being San Bernardino, California.

During the same period, we have heard story after story of young men of color being shot to death by police. Ferguson has become part of our lexicon, as have the names of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray. These are not new stories, only the names and places are new, and yet, nothing much has changed. This past week, demonstrators marched through the city of Chicago calling for the mayor's resignation as allegations of extreme misconduct by the Chicago Police Department continue to surface.

And, in the wake of events in Paris and San Bernardino, some people in this country have said the most horrible things about our Muslim brothers and sisters. There have been calls to monitor mosques around the country and to ban Muslims from entering the United States. On YouTube, you can watch a video from a town hall meeting in Virginia, where a community of Muslims was hoping to build a mosque, and you can see a man yelling at the top of his lungs, "No way! It's not going to happen! I won't let it happen! You're all terrorists!"

Is this America? Is this the kind of people we want to be?

As Christians, we cannot ignore these issues or these questions. They demand some kind of response from each and every one of us, and so we stand at a critical juncture in our common life. Today, we stand at the Jordan River and hear the John the Baptist crying out: *Bear fruits worthy of repentance... Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; and every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*

His words are harsh; and perhaps, difficult to understand; but, what he is saying is faith without works is dead. As children of God, as followers of Jesus, we must do good work. We must bear good fruit. It is not enough to say we are Christian. We must show the world we are Christian, with every word that we speak and every action that we take. We have to orient our lives in God's direction, putting God's ways before our ways. We have to be the kind of people God intended us to be, the kind of people we all want to be, deep in our hearts. That is what John is telling us. He is calling us back to a life with God. He is calling us back to what is good, calling us back to what is true, calling us back to what is right.

---

<sup>1</sup> www.pbs.org, December 2, 2015.

*So, what then should we do?*

It is a good question. We heard it three times in our reading this morning because the people listening to John the Baptist wanted to know. Like us, they were looking for some guidance, some direction. How do we find God? How should we live our lives? What is the right thing to do?

John answered with words of generosity and compassion and justice, because John was showing the way of Jesus. That was his role. That was his mission: to point us toward Jesus.

If we were to ask Jesus the same question: “What then should we do?” We know what he would say. He would say:

*Love your enemies.*

*Do good to those who hate you.*

*Bless those who curse you.*

*Pray for those who abuse you.*

*Feed the hungry.*

*Clothe the naked.*

*Welcome the stranger.*

*Love your neighbor as yourself.*

Because that is the way of Jesus.

There was another story in the news this is week, one that did not receive a lot of attention with events in Chicago and the political debate about Muslims dominating the headlines. This story was about Pope Francis. Pope Francis declared this current church year to be a Jubilee, or Holy Year. Since 1300, jubilee years have been celebrated every 25 years, and many expected the next jubilee to occur in 2025, but a pope can proclaim an “extraordinary” jubilee when he deems it necessary, and that is exactly what Pope Francis did. He declared this year a year of mercy and compassion and forgiveness. As he pushed open the bronze doors in St. Peter’s Basilica, the doors that are a symbolic threshold to salvation and remain bricked up until a jubilee year, Francis said:

*To pass through the Holy Door means to rediscover the infinite mercy of the Father who*

*welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them.*

The door of mercy and compassionate is open, and now is the time for us to walk through, to the good side, and into the light of God.

Amen.