

**3 Advent C December 16, 2018**  
**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**The Way Things Are**  
**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

The Rev. Dr. Hannah Adams Ingram recently found herself in a perplexing situation at work. Mother Hannah works at Franklin College in Franklin, Indiana as the Director of Religious Life and as Chaplain. Franklin, for those who do not know, is a secular college. It is not religious and does not have an official religious affiliation. Yet Mother Hannah works there in a very religious capacity. When she was asked to justify her very religious position in an educational institution that is very secular, she found herself unable to give a good or satisfactory answer to anyone, including herself. She started to wonder if perhaps her position was one of those superfluous ones that could be cut so the money spent on her salary and benefits could better serve the vision and mission of the college.

What helped Mother Hannah with her problem was finding a kindred spirit, someone who also spoke to people they did not fit in with. That kindred spirit was none other than John the Baptist, who we just heard about in this morning's Gospel reading. While it might surprise us to hear a chaplain say a prophet who called the people who came to him the very uncomplimentary name of "brood of vipers" is a kindred spirit, what Mother Hannah saw was someone who was not afraid to give people the good news that "the way things are is not how they have to be." The way things are is not how they have to be.

That is how Mother Hannah found her reason, purpose and calling for being in the midst of a community and an institution that she didn't fit with. She believed that like John the Baptist, she too was where she was to deliver the message that the way things are is not how they have to be. That change is possible. And that is good news everyone needs to hear, the religious and those who are not religious.

I can't help but feel a comradeship with Mother Hannah. For like her, all of us here at Church of the Good Shepherd find ourselves smack dab in the middle of an educational institution we are not in any way officially affiliated with. Although many of you work for or retired from Ohio University, or attend or perhaps have just graduated from OU – hearty congratulations to you graduates – this parish, me, and the staff are not officially part of OU in any way. And yet, at the very same time, we say in the prayers of the people every Sunday that our ministry, our purpose, and our vision is mainly to be present to the students, faculty, staff and community of Ohio University, which is a secular institution. I vividly remember when my family and I arrived at Good Shepherd after accepting the call and appointment by the Bishop to

serve as your priest-in-charge, standing outside on the front steps of the church watching the huge crowds of people passing me by and wondering how in the world I was ever going to enter into such a fast-moving stream of traffic. There seemed to be no room for me, no one noticed me or the church building, and no one was going to slow down so I could merge into all that energy.

I could relate to Mother Hannah by wondering if I should be here at all. It took me a while to realize this was an opportunity for a very different kind of ministry. We didn't need to rush from class to class with the traffic. Instead, very much like John the Baptist, we too, could simply be present right where we are, and we could be present in ways that proclaim and show the very same message: the way things are is not how they have to be.

When we look beyond the harsh name calling at the beginning of today's Gospel lesson about John the Baptist and can stop mentally counting the number of coats in our closets or the cans of food in our pantries, we might begin to see the good news Mother Hannah saw in John's message to the people who came to him to be baptized.

Scholars tell us the reason for John calling the people in the crowd a "brood of vipers" was to get their attention so he could explain to them that the purpose of the baptism he was offering was not salvific in and of itself. His baptism was not a "get out of judgment from God" card and did not make them part of an elite group that would be saved just because they were baptized. Instead, this baptism was about repentance: about change. A change of heart and a change of mind away from self and toward God. Away from the secular and toward the holy. Away from the way things are and toward the way things can be.

That is why the folks in the crowd asked John the Baptist what they were to do. If baptism wasn't going to save them, then what was the point? And John answered them by saying the way things are isn't how they have to be.

His message is quite simple. He didn't tell the crowds to leave their lives, their professions, their families and live the wilderness with him. He didn't tell the tax collectors to resign from their jobs and he didn't tell the soldiers to lay down their armor and become pacifists. Instead, he directed the people back to their lives, and challenged them to live differently. Instead of holding on to what isn't needed just so others can't have, John said to share what they had. To the tax collectors he said to be fair. And he told the soldiers not to be bullies. In other words, he told people to go back to their lives in a new way so that all people can see the way things are is not how it has to be.

The message works even to this day: to share, to be fair, and to treat all people with respect. This is very much at the heart of the Advent Devotional some of us have been following called *Living Well Through Advent, Practicing Generosity with our Heart, Soul, Strength and Mind*. Generosity is just a big word that is about sharing, fairness, and respect. When we practice generosity as individuals and as a parish, we are giving the message to the busy world outside our doors that the way things are is not how they have to be.

If you get a chance to talk with them, the staff at our new coffee shop ministry we call CrossRoads Café has had some powerful experiences with that message this semester. One of the aspects of CrossRoads Café is that we operate on a pay-it-forward model. Anyone can purchase a cup of coffee or coffee drinks like lattes and cappuccinos and espressos. What makes CrossRoads generous is that anyone can also purchase coffee drinks for someone yet to come. So, if a customer finds themselves without cash – as CrossRoads is still operating on a cash only system right now – that customer does not have to go away without coffee. The CrossRoads staff happily tells them their coffee has already been purchased for them, so they can have whatever they want. Every single cashless customer has been surprised by this and at first didn't know what to make of it. The staff handles this by reassuring them they can come back and pay for their coffee or pay it forward for someone else. A few customers ask if the café staff needs contact information to get the coffee, but the staff tells them no, they trust the customer, this is how we do things at CrossRoads. The staff can tell you much better than I how many customers who have received the pay it forward generosity do return, sometimes just to pay for their coffee, sometimes to pay it forward. Some do not return. Either way, they found themselves in a place where the way things are is not how it is here.

We extend that pay it forward generosity to anyone and everyone who comes in. And that welcome and inclusion of all people regardless of age, race, gender, social and economic class recently surprised a small group of students in the Center for Entrepreneurship at OU that I worked with this semester. In their final meeting with me they all expressed that such an inclusive welcome was something they did NOT associate with any church. Let that sink in for a moment. These students did not associate the characteristics of welcome, inclusion, and generosity with any church before meeting me and learning about Church of the Good Shepherd and our new ministry. And the message that the way things are isn't how they have to be the students heard from me was indeed extremely good news to them.

Because instead of sharing anger at how things are, like so many in the world and community are doing, and expressing disrespect for those who we disagree with or tell lies, or exclud those who are different, which is – we are all told all the time – just the way things are (which is not good news); we here at Good Shepherd are practicing generosity and living the good news that the way things are isn't how they have to be. Perhaps one of the lessons we can learn as this semester ends is that good news is much needed, and our reason for being here, right here, is as strong as ever. Of course we practice generosity in so many of our other ministries too, but it is always good to remember why we do what we do, and when we want to make any changes, to reflect on how such changes fit with our mission and purpose so that we can grow deeper into the dream of God that John the Baptist proclaimed and Jesus embodied: not only is the way things are not the way it has to be, but it won't be that way forever, change will come, one day that generosity that has surprised some people this semester at Church of the Good Shepherd will be the way, when Jesus comes again.