

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“What the Lord Requires”
By Eric Howell
Luke 3:7-20
December 13, 2009

We have a rule in our house that Christmas music can be played only from the day after Thanksgiving through Christmas and maybe a few days afterwards. It's not important to know whose rule that is or who would be listening to Christmas music in October if she were free to do so. It is the case that during those weeks, we listen to a lot of Christmas music. It's all we listen to, and it plays in the house all day. So we get a lot of Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, orchestras, choirs, and for some unknown reason, Neil Diamond. If music were food, Christmas music would be pecan pie. There's some substance to it. It has a shape. But mostly it's sugar and nuts, it's filling. While you can only take so much of it, it's really good, especially with a little whipped cream on top.

There's plenty of non-religious holiday music, and there's Christmas music about just about every aspect of the Christmas story—Away in a Manger . . . Silent Night . . . O Come All Ye Faithful, joyful and triumphant, O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining . . . I don't think I've heard a Christmas song with anything to do with John the Baptist, knee deep in the Jordan River, calling his congregation a “brood of vipers.” This is not usually how we think about preparing for Christmas. We think about little decorations that we add to our houses and houses of worship to dress up for Christmas. John dresses us down. John says that getting ready isn't about decorating your life with religious things. It's about preparing for the Lord by cleaning out your life from the stuff that is keeping you from God.

Like Away in a Manger and much of the Christmas story, John is also interested in the relationship between parents and children. He's looking at a bunch of people who take comfort, solace, and theological security in being children of Abraham. As children of Abraham, they believe they are entitled to protection and provision by God. They are chosen people, and therefore people who don't have anything to worry about. Not so fast, says John. In Israel at this time, there was a practice of proselyte baptism—gentile converts had to be bathed as a sign of radical change, purity in the new faith and birth into the people of Israel. It was a sign of deep repentance and exchange of a former way of life for a new way of life. John makes the shocking assertion that even Israel must be washed. If the chosen will not respond, “God is able from the stones to raise up children to Abraham.” We can imagine how such preaching angered those who felt they were already in. The people said, “We are children of Abraham.” John says, you are children of snakes—“a brood of vipers,” and we all know what snakes represent in the Bible.

And so say the great prophets of Israel.

There was the idea in Israel that the “Day of the Lord” was coming. This phrase, “Day of the Lord,” was shorthand for the idea that a time was coming, maybe even a literal day, when God would intervene in the history of humankind to deliver His special people from all the bad, evil people and events that befell them. “The Day of the Lord is coming,” they encouraged one another. This is bad, but when the day of the Lord comes,

the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be rescued. The day of the Lord is good for us, bad for them. Not so fast, said the prophets.

“Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or fled into a house, leaned against the wall and a snake bit him [In other words, you can’t escape]. Is not the day of the Lord, darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? (Amos 5:18-20).

The prophets’ sobering mission was to reorient the people that God sees the heart, not the outward adornments. God sees our relationships with one another, not how we dress it up. God’s more interested in the fruit you produce than the family tree from which you spring. God’s not interested in our religion if our relationships aren’t just. So God continues: “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer Me sacrifices, I will not accept them Take away from Me the noise of your songs, to the melody of your harps I won’t listen, but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream” (Amos 5:21-24). God is not interested in what we say to Him if how we treat one another is unjust.

This seems to be what’s eating at John. He was looking at a group of people who came out to him to add a little scoop of religion on their lives, maybe just a dollop, to decorate their consciences with a little liturgy. John would have none of it. This isn’t about a little pleasant exercise to add to your life. This is about changing your life. This isn’t about a little religion as a garnish. God doesn’t want you to nibble at the edges of this. God wants you all in, to bend your knee at His name.

I told this story at an ordination service for Cameron Jorgenson earlier this year, encouraging him, as all preachers need to hear, that we must preach the gospel with passion and vigor. So some of you may have heard me tell of my friend who went to the hills of western North Carolina to preach for a summer and was sat down by the chair of deacons. “I don’t know what they do down there at seminary, but out here we preach the gospel, and we preach it hard.” John the Baptist would have fit in just swell.

We need to hear his message. Okay, I need to hear it. Friday morning heading to lectionary breakfast, running late, looking for my coat. “It’s in the wash.” “No, I know, the other one.” “I don’t know, look in the closet”. Not in there. “Never mind, I’ll just wear this other one.” “What are you talking about at lectionary breakfast this morning?” “You know, that passage in Luke where John the Baptist tells those people if they have two coats to give one to someone who doesn’t have one.” Aw man.

I like that coat and the other one and the other one. Got it at Target last year for like \$15. Why didn’t I buy another one that day to give away? I’ve gone out to lunch and dinner a few times in recent weeks. Why not write a check to a hunger relief organization for the amount? I’ve bought a few Christmas presents; why not buy some toys for the Mission Waco toy store? I could go on . . . I have a roof over my head . . . I have easy transportation . . . I have access to health care . . . I have groceries . . . I have, I have, I have. And so do you.

It’s a little hard to think that something like giving up or giving away some of these things is in any way vital to our salvation, even though John seems to think it is.

How could it be? We are taught that salvation is accepting the love and grace that Jesus offers to all people. You have been saved by grace through faith, we read in Ephesians, and that makes sense. God gives us grace in Christ to forgive us for our sins and then we are asked, “Do you believe this? Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God? Do you believe He died for your sins? Do you believe God raised Him from the dead?” If you do believe this and you are ready to then devote your life to Him, then you are a Christian. And then you are baptized and then you spend the rest of your life serving Christ, having received this grace and believed in it by faith. As Christians then, we are saved and safe. We are redeemed and reborn.

What happens then is that sometimes we get complacent in our Christianity. We come to think that our security is wrapped up in our forms, our liturgies, our theologies, or the roll our names is on.

This morning our attention is directed to those who are vulnerable—

the one without a coat

the one who is at the bottom of the economic system . . .

the one who is at the mercy of the powerful . . .

In God’s way of seeing the world, the extreme vulnerability of any person is a sign of the brokenness of all people. This is where purely spiritualized religious sensibility and the so-called economic and political realities intersect. As they say, this is where the rubber of faith meets the road of reality.

In the prophets, God did not just call the people to look deeper within themselves for a higher plane of knowledge. God did not ask the people for more elaborate worship or for more feasts, incense, and sacrifices. Not that they didn’t offer. What shall we give you, what do you require of us? Burnt offerings? Year-old calves? Thousands of rams? 10,000 rivers of oil, my firstborn—the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? What is it you want? (Micah 6:6-7). The response: “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

God was deeply concerned with the relationship between those in power and those who had no control over what happened to them, between those who had resources and those caught in the trap of poverty, between those who held the keys, the purse-strings, and the spears, and those who could only knock on the door, beg for handouts, and cower before power.

This is John’s message as well. What shall we do, the people asked? You may notice that this is the exact same question posed by the people who heard Peter’s sermon in Acts 2. Cut to the heart by Peter’s story of Jesus, the son of God, crucified, Peter answered, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:37-38).

Now here in Luke, What shall we do? Change the way you live. Change your relationship with other people as a first step. If you have extra, give some away. If you have power, use it for good. If you have authority, use it to empower, not overpower. It’s a start. No, John laughed, I’m not the Messiah. What I’m telling you is just baby

steps. If you think this is radical, just wait. The difference is the difference between being baptized with water and being washed by the Holy Spirit. It's the difference between untying His sandals and walking in His shoes. Doing some simple acts of justice and kindness is just a start.

It's the sort of start that begins to open you up to the coming of the Lord. Because His coming is just the sort that's going to turn everything upside down and inside out. He's going to talk about how the poor are blessed and the hungry and thirsty will be filled. He's going to read from Isaiah and own the words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." (Isaiah 61:1). He 's going to talk about how "if you see someone in prison, or clothe the naked, or feed the hungry, you are doing it to Me" (Matthew 25:35-40).

When the Messiah comes, His message and His life are going to be life-transforming, world-changing. And it's going to be hard for a lot of us. But it's also a deep truth that we long to hear straight forward. There's no getting around this. The gospel is hard, and it's hard for everyone in some way. If it's not, then it's not the gospel.

Thomas Merton writes this: "Let us frankly recognize the true import and true challenge of the Christian message. The whole gospel message becomes impertinent and laughable if there is an easy answer to everything in a few external gestures and pious intentions. Christianity is a religion for people who are aware that there is a deep wound, a fissure of sin that strikes down to the very heart of a person's being. They have tasted the sickness that is present in the inmost heart of humanity estranged from God" (CP 107).

Surely, it is only in this sense that what John preaches, it is, as Luke calls it, good news. Without this, it is surely the worst kind of news. I am to give away what is my right, what I have earned, what I have inherited, what I deserve. It is good news only if there's something better.

Merton again: "The full maturity of the spiritual life comes only when we pass through the dread, anguish, trouble, and fear that necessarily accompany the inner crisis of 'spiritual death' in which we finally abandon our attachment to our exterior self and surrender completely to Christ" (CP 109).

And thinking about that, maybe there is a Christmas song after all . . .

It came upon a midnight clear, that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold. Peace on the earth goodwill to men, from heaven's all gracious king, the world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.

For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophets seen of old, when, with the ever circling years, shall come the time foretold; when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and all the world give back the song which now the angels sing.