

“WHAT DOES GRANDMA WANT?”

Luke 3:7-18 December 15, 2024

There are many signs that let us know the Christmas Season is upon us; lights on houses, Tree up in Rockefeller plaza, and certainly all the advertisements. When I was a child, Christmas began with the arrival of the **Sears and Roebuck Christmas Catalogue**, which the four of us went through circling our desired gifts with the thoroughness of a zealous grammar teacher. But one of the signs of the season is receiving our very first Christmas card. Although we receive less cards than we used to, of course, we send less than we used to too.

Most Christmas cards have lovely pictures of families, snow, jolly St. Nick, presents, trees, manger scenes, and well wishes. However, I have never received a Christmas card with John the Baptist on it. Lest we forget, he is very much a part of the Advent Season. If you recall, his miracle birth to an aged mother, Elizabeth, proceeded that of Jesus. But I have never received a John the Baptist Christmas card. And probably for good reason!

What on earth would Hallmark do with John? Can't you just see it? "Greetings from our house to yours. Our thoughts of you at this time of year are best expressed in the words of John the Baptist, **‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?’ Merry Christmas!**”

But like John or not, he was born to get people ready for the Messiah — not for the baby Jesus, but for the man he would become. So, as we

celebrate Advent, there is good reason for us to stand on the banks of the river Jordan instead of waiting in the maternity ward with Mary or hitting the shopping malls. Because John has something important to say to us about preparing for Christmas, and it's something we aren't going to get in a Christmas card. John's message is, **"The Messiah is suddenly coming to town. Clean up and get your act together before it's too late."**

That's not exactly the cheery, feel-good message we want to hear at Christmas, but perhaps it's the one we need to hear. People flocked to John because he spoke the truth and gave a message of impending judgment. There are few things that get our attention quicker than someone speaking truth and making threats. And notice, John is not picky about who he gives this message to, nor is he letting anyone off the guilt hook, not tax-collectors, not Roman soldiers, not the general public, and not even his own people, even though some believed they had a free from judgment pass. "Oh no", John says, "Your heritage won't shield you from what is coming." It's like the father who told his misbehaving teenage son, **"Look you had better straighten up because I can take you out of this world and make another one just like you."**

In John's words, **"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."** Remember one of the images for Israel was that of a tree. If the ax of God is ready to swing the tree is in big trouble. As

alarming as the image is, there is a hint of hope, a way forward, or an escape from the coming wrath. God's expectation for Israel and for the followers of Christ, is to bear good fruit. Bearing good fruit does not make us right with God, but it certainly is a testimony that we are right with God. So, what does it mean to bear good fruit?

Fortunately, we don't have to guess because the crowd listening to John seem to take him seriously. They are bold enough to ask, "**What shall we do?**" And John is not slow to answer

I. SHARE

The Best Seed – There once was a farmer who grew the most excellent wheat. Every season he won the award for the best wheat in his county. A curious woman came to him to ask him about his success. He told her that the key was sharing his best seed with his neighbors so they could plant the seed as well.

The woman asked, "**How can you share your best seed with your neighbors when they compete with you every year?**" "That's simple," the farmer replied. "The wind spreads the pollen from everyone's wheat and carries it from field to field. If my neighbors grew inferior wheat, cross-pollination would degrade everyone's wheat, including mine. If I'm to grow the best wheat, I must help my neighbors grow the best wheat as well."

When the people asked, "What shall we do?" John said, "**Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has**

food must do likewise.” Authentic Christian living begins with sharing. That sounds so simple doesn’t it. Sharing is one of the first lessons we learn as children, and yet often forget as adults. We have much to share. We can share a ride, share a meal, share a seat, share a good fortune, share a smile, share wisdom, share a kind word, share a gift, share a house, share a neighborhood, share...well, you can fill in the blank.

Sharing is the whole point of Christmas, isn’t it? God shared Jesus with the world. Jesus’ life and ministry were marked by acts of sharing and service. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, taught about the Kingdom, and spent time with the marginalized.

The early church was defined as a people who loved by sharing. The disciples appointed deacons to make sure their widows were not neglected when food was distributed. Many of them went so far as to divest themselves of private property and put the funds into escrow to help those in need: Acts tells us, “**Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ... There was not a needy person among them.**” No wonder they earned “the goodwill of all the people”.

You can’t read the Bible without noticing the emphasis on sharing. In fact, all the prophets, including Jesus and John, made sharing an ethical imperative and responsibility. As the seed farmer knew, as he shared all were blessed with fruitful crops.

II. INTEGRITY AT WORK

If you have traveled or lived in the western half of the United States, then you probably encountered the **In-N-Out Burger**. It's a 60-year-old company with a cult-like following among people who like fresh, delicious hamburgers. In fact, their one simple goal is to make “**the freshest, most consistent high-quality hamburger in the world**” or at least in the western U.S. Throughout its 60-year history, the simple menu has seldom changed: cheeseburgers, hamburgers, French fries (one size only), milkshakes (chocolate, vanilla and strawberry, one size only) and soft drinks. What's unusual about In-N-Out is that you can't own a franchise. The owner doesn't do franchising. Nor has In-N-Out gone public. It has, so far, resisted the allure of corporate greed and the shiny new thing.

When the tax collectors and Roman Soldiers asked John, “**Teacher what should we do?**” John replied, “**Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you. Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages.**”

Remember the tax collectors and the Roman soldiers were in cahoots. The tax collectors padded the bill, and the soldiers enforced it and then they split the overcharge fees. Who's going to argue with a crooked police officer backed by a crooked system? Of course, it made for lousy public relations, but they got rich.

John gives two pieces of advice. One, stop extorting and cheating people. Just because you can mark up the price 300% doesn't mean you need to. The customer is more important than the stockholders. The law of supply and demand has its limits. And don't forget that God is the one who supplies and is ultimately, the one who demands.

Secondly, John tells the people to be content with what you have. Do your work with integrity, and stop being so greedy. The truth is most of us have more than enough. We don't need a refrigerator that tells us we are out of milk, the latest i-phone, nor the fastest car. Contrary to all the marketers, Christmas is not the season of greed. Remember what and who you are you really working for in the first place? Live simply and be grateful. Have integrity in your work and don't abuse your position. Bless instead of oppress.

III. WANT SOMETHING MORE

When trying to check off the people on our Christmas list, I have always found buying a present for grandma and grandpa a challenge. What does Grandma really want? Of course, having become a grandpa I get it. You get to the point in life that you don't really need another knick-knack on the shelf. But its more than that. Most of us grandparents realize that the most important things in life don't come in a box. Things like family, joy, love, peace, curiosity, new learnings, health and friendship are truly the better things, the best of things in life.

The people were wondering if John was the Messiah, after all he was dynamic, he spoke God's word, he was calling people back to God, and he had quite a following. He certainly sounds like a Messiah. But John answered them, **"I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to unite the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with 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."**

John's message was I may share with you God's word but there is something better on the way. The living Word of God enfleshed is coming. He is the very best of God and in his hands is the gift of life and Spirit. Follow him, not the his servant. Don't settle for the lesser when the greater is right before you.

Isn't that the lesson of Advent? How often have we settled for something less? We ran after the shiny, the new, the popular and after the initial excitement wore off, we were on to the next shiny, new, and popular thing. Yet, this endless pursuit doesn't really satisfy, and often leaves us disappointed, disillusioned, and broke.

Jesus promises something better and lasting; eternal fellowship, purpose, and Spirit. The Holy Spirit was the mark of Jesus and his future followers. The wind and the fire are the powerful presence of God. Jesus came to gather the people to himself. To just want John is to not want

enough. It is to settle for something less. To only talk about repentance is not enough. Jesus came to give life not just wash us clean.

United Methodist preacher William Willimon, then campus minister at Duke University, once warned his listeners in a campus chapel service:

“If you are going to graduate, you must first get past the English Department. If you are going to practice law, you must pass the bar. If you want to get to medical school, you must survive Organic Chemistry.”

Likewise, “If you want to get to the joy of Bethlehem in the presence of Jesus, you must get past John the Baptist in the desert.” John’s a demanding professor. The final for his course has some tough questions:

If you’re a *fashionista*, give half your clothes away. If you’re a foodie, invite a beggar to your feast. If you’re a shyster, stop cheating people. If you’re a bully, become a model of kindness. You’ve got to stop being a taker, if you want to experience Christmas rightly. You’ve got to become a giver. Then you will bear good fruit. Then you will meet the Christ of Christmas. Now that you know what to do, what are you going to do about it? Amen.

Luke 3:7-20

⁷John 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? ⁸Bear 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. ⁹Even 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." ¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴Soldiers 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."

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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." ¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

This is the Word of the Lord.
Thanks be To God.