

SLIDE – CHRISTMAS PACKAGES

Let's skip repenting. Let's instead go straight to the gift giving, the celebrations, the concerts, the gatherings, and the programs. Let's just enjoy the light displays and get back to more serious matters at another date. Once December comes, American society doesn't have patience for anything which is not celebratory. And for many of us, we enjoy the sights and sounds of Christmas. We decorate our homes, our businesses and ourselves to match the holiday.

It is common to receive wishes for the joy of the season of Christmas from friends and loved ones. But often the meaning of joy gets associated with happiness and the two are used as if there were no distinctions between them. Frederick Buechner has said that happiness turns up more or less where you would expect it – in a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. I would add that happiness is present in December and holiday celebrations. But joy has a different character.

Buechner quotes Jesus word on joy in the gospel of John, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Jesus said this at the Last Supper, as he created a new meal and community. He said this after giving his disciples a new commandment, that just as he loved them with a divine love, they were to now love each other with the grace, compassion and mercy which he so abundantly shared with them. With this we see that joy is much deeper than the appearances of happiness.

There is something to the work which congregations aspire to that strikes a different chord than the patterns in local gatherings. The beautiful service of Blue Christmas, a worship service for those whose experience of loss may make it difficult for them to be happy in this season is a wonderful example. In the midst of a society which cannot stop saying that Christmas is about being jolly and bright, at St. John's there was an acknowledgement of the deeper emotions of life and the good news that God is with those who grieve.

SLIDE – JOHN THE BAPTIST

The story of John the Baptist strikes a different chord for some who hear it this December day. But I think it fits for what the gospel of Jesus Christ is to accomplish, things like salvation, forgiveness and restoration. The story of John the Baptist moves towards deeper life. The word of God came to John in the most unlikely of places, land that was wild and not welcoming. People came to him to hear this word.

The word which he began to speak was of a leveling of the landscape of life, of society, of opportunity, and of governance. Already the gospel writer Luke has described it as the powerful being brought down from their lofty thrones and the lowly being lifted up; the hungry being filled with good things and the rich being sent away empty. I wonder if John paused when he received this word of God. I wonder if he took a deep breath before his first sermon.

SLIDE - TIBERIUS

John had entered the world stage with the charge to speak the word of God. The gospel writer Luke takes care to locate John in the context of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate and the lesser ruler Herod Antipas. All of these men had considerable power over any person's life. Wherever one would turn, Rome ruled. The word of God comes and signals an end to those who have oppressed people. The word of God comes and signals an end to those who have not seen and regarded others as human being of value.

Besides the power mongering Roman rulers, locally in Judea where the people of God resided, there is a separate political system in place. While there is no rule by a Jewish king, the office of the High Priest functioned to represent the people of Judea to Rome. Although it may not be possible to give hard evidence regarding the level of integrity in the office of the High Priest, it was always to Rome's advantage to appoint someone who would be cooperative to their Roman goals. The High Priest likely had divided loyalties. Is it any wonder that Jesus later would instruct his disciples to pray to God the Father "your kingdom come," for the present kingdom, international and national and local, is found lacking.

SLIDE – JOHN PREACHING

John's message draws attention, and the multitude gathers and listens. They are oppressed under the thumb of Rome. People, by faith, are open to this message. People who are tired of being stepped on are looking for an alternative. Others know in their hearts that to live in the cruel manner of their Roman leaders is not right. They are attracted to the message of a new kingdom and rule which levels the playing field. Even though when we look at it, the word which John the Baptist speaks sounds harsh, it is a friendly word, if you will, recognized by those who hear it to be a word for their benefit.

Today's advice is "never call them jerks," but John calls out, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee. Instead, bear fruits worthy of repentance." Then something surprising happens, those known to do evil have a change of heart. They not only see with new eyes, they wish to change their behavior and live in a new manner. They are willing to let go of stubbornly held ways. The crowds, tax collectors and soldiers ask, "What should we do now?"

Neither Jewish tradition nor the Christian tradition teaches that only correct belief makes one righteous. There is a need of the joining of belief, the confession on the lips, with good deeds. (James 2.26) *Faith without works is dead.* It could be argued that the Jewish people need only look to the Torah, and so know what to do. But here it becomes clear that more information is needed. Perhaps it is because of the coming destruction which John alludes to, the question becomes more urgent, "What should they do **now?**" All Torah requires interpretation, not all things are explicit. There is no separate law code for tax collectors, soldiers, lawyers, and rulers.

The crowds ask, "What should we do now?" and John advises them to share what they have so that all have what they need. The tax collectors ask, "What should we do now?" and John tells them not to get greedy, to only access an amount over the tax that will allow them to put bread on their table, not buy a second home. The soldiers ask, "What should we do now?" and John counsels them not to use force as they relate to the public. We can imagine the great rulers as they saw these shifts in behavior creating a more equitable life for all ask the same question, "What should we do now?" As for John, we will read later that his early death will be Rome's attempt at an answer.

John's advice can be difficult to implement. When John's warning comes to people who rely on privilege, responses can vary. I don't know why except to say that God's Spirit had worked in those who took John's word to heart so they reformed their lives. We don't know what other conversations may have been occurring which had influence on the opening of their hearts.

SLIDE - PRIVILEGE

It takes some self-reflection, some outside word, and the mystery of faith to be reformed. I think it is more than logic and reason at play, or at least that is true for changes in me. I am grateful when something comes into view that encourages change in me. About two years ago one such event was our

Pastors Winter Theological gathering where the topic was racism. Our bishop then, Rick Hoyme brought the topic to us because he had been moved by his own experience. He had been at a training session where they were given an assessment measuring privilege. He discovered he enjoyed a high level of privilege while a woman sitting next to him experienced a very low level of privilege. Before the assessment, he had not given much thought that there were any differences between them. After the assessment, he was forced to acknowledge that many things in his life are pre-set for him, a white man, while those same things make life more difficult for the woman, who was black. Such knowledge, which was hidden became an issue about which he could no longer remain silent.

SLIDE – ROAD TO EMMAUS

John the Baptist was given the word of God and he spoke. The crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers received the word of God, and they asked for advice for the reforming of their lives. John spoke of the repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is how the main message of the gospel of Luke begins. Similar words are spoken by the risen Christ as he sends his disciples to do ministry. They are to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus to all nations.

The good news in part is that those who ask the question, what should we do now, are on the right side of faith. Asking the right questions gets us in position to address oppression, to see our responsibility to others, and to act on their behalf.

The larger story is not what you want for Christmas, but how the Christ, who first comes to us as vulnerable and small, becomes the one who in great ways signals the redeeming of all people, a new way of life, and the promise of salvation.