

## The Christmas We Need Luke 3:7-18

### Slide: Christ is Born

Would someone please give John the Baptist another job? Because we all know what will happen to him if he keeps up this ranting and raving preaching style in the desert, this holding people accountable and asking them to make sacrifices, to work on themselves instead of trying to fix other people. It will not go over well at all. As per God's desire, his parents name him John, which means "God is gracious." If you ask me, there is nothing gracious about this locust eating, camel hair wearing, shouting preacher at all. Can't he just act like the rest of us and not cause so many waves?

We all know that his actions lead to his death. His desire to call people to prepare the way for the coming Kingdom does not go over well for the Kingdom that had things in a tight control. Even his warnings to all who came to hear him – the ax is already lying at the root of the tree! Crying out in the desert to prepare the way of the Lord is not all that's sweet and saccharin, not in the least bit Christmas-y.

I'm trying to imagine this adult John the Baptist prophet in a manger scene but it just doesn't work. Even though we come across John the Baptist every year as part of our preparing for Christmas while in the Advent season like we are, I just could not put him at the stable with the sheep, the oxen, the angels and the shepherds. He is too wild, too out of fashion, not pretty enough, not glittery enough and definitely not nice. He is too much in your face, not the way the Christmas story ought to read.

And, we know what happens to him due to him acting like a prophet. We find out later in the a few chapters along that he is beheaded for his trouble of paving the way for the Messiah. Maybe if we made him what we wanted him to be, it would work out better for everyone concerned. We could remind him of his Christmas duties to shop for presents. He has his Uncle Joseph and Aunt Mary, his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth, and oh yes, his cousin Jesus to consider. Maybe they would like a new pair of slippers.

Or, we could make John the Baptist a Santa in the mall. He could let little children sit on his lap and listen to their wishes and wants, laughing that sweet “ho, ho, ho” and making his belly jiggle. Eating candy canes is better than eating locusts. Yes, that would end better for John. It would also be easier for us.

### **Slide: Christmas lights**

But, as it turns out, John the Baptist just does not fit in with our cultural Christmas, the Christmas that we somehow want or think we need – the Hallmark card and movie all the way. He would make a poor Santa Claus because instead of doling out toys, he would instead be yelling: “Hey you, little boy, you already have two coats – you should give one of them away!”

And, furthermore, he would make a poor Santa Claus because he would not *want* to spend time listening to what *we* want and what *we* desire. Instead, he would want us to focus on what *God* wants and what *God* desires. He would want a complete turnaround to what Christmas has become. Given how this year has gone for me, I

think I’d rather get the new pair of slippers.

But, when push comes to shove, John truly knows and sees what Christmas is. With all the baking, family gatherings, and presents, there’s also domestic violence, homelessness, pandemic, a lot of bickering and arguing, and a whole lot of grieving going on. And, that’s why Jesus came in the first place. And, that is why John wants to tell us what to do about that. It’s the Christmas we may need after all.

Don’t get me wrong. I love all the cultural ways we have made Christmas special and I know that loss has occurred given all that has happened in these last couple years. I, too, have felt loss of what was. I love the idea of gatherings, special meals, Christmas cards, and “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire”. I really do, especially this year I long for it.

But, on Friday, I presided at a funeral for a stillborn, and I’m mad. I’m mad that this poor child could not be. I’m mad seeing a little casket in our sanctuary, because of course, there is nothing at all Hallmark about it. I grieve

for that couple who longed to welcome a birth, not a death into their lives.

There has to be more to Christmas than molding, glomming, and sticking on to the Incarnation our traditions, as important and wonderful as they are. This Christ coming into the world has to be bigger than that for a stillborn birth, God truly coming to be with us, suffering with us, and dying like us. And, in fact, the Christmas truth of Christ coming into the world stands directly opposed to the powers of this world. Thank God Christmas still comes whether or not we think it feels like it.

Although things are very different from the time of John the Baptist, the message of John may still be what we need. The first century was a time of immense turning in on self, of choosing Caesar as God, a trivializing of God's message on earth. Today, we find ourselves not at all immune to the same problems. And, in the first century, something about John's ranting and raving drew people to him because these were people longed to have something change within them so that God could do

something with them. Who knows? Maybe John is trying to help us work on ourselves as tired as we are.

### **Slide: Metanoia**

It is a complete turnaround. The Greek word John uses is Metanoia. Today, we like to translate it as repentance. But, repentance is too simplified for me these days. To repent comes down to a confession and an absolution, like we do at the beginning of worship.

And, while as we called to do that to know we are a forgiven people, Metanoia is more than that. Metanoia is a complete turnaround. It's more than confession. It's confession that leads to change. It's going down one path and then turning around to head down the opposite path. That is what John is calling people to do to prepare the way for Jesus Christ. Metanoia! Change! Turnaround!

Because, if we don't turnaround, we won't see who is coming! And, it's very difficult to see something when we are facing away from it. We also may not see the Incarnation in each other

and in the stranger along the way. We may go through the motions of Christmas without seeing Christ in it, the Christ who died for it, who strove to make possible for us, and who rose so that along the way, our lives would be more like his.

### **Slide: Blue Christmas Tree**

This is the Christmas we need, the kind that John the Baptist speaks of with his preaching words of repentance. Perhaps we need to change! Maybe we need this John at Christmastime with the courage to say “stop going the direction you are going! Look at what you are doing! You are getting farther and farther from God!” Without that metanoia, without the turnaround, we may not be ready for what Christmas really is...Christ bursting in on us to change everything!

And, suffice to say, we, all of us, need the turnaround, no matter who we are. John reminds us of this. For each of us, that turnaround will be different. Perhaps it will be a return to a spiritual discipline we have lost. Perhaps it will be admitting self-loathing and a desire to find

compassion for yourself. Perhaps it will be accepting blame for your part in someone else's pain. Perhaps it will be a path finally away from addiction. Either way, the turnaround is necessary, because Christ came not to make it easy for us. *He* came to save us. And, we need Christ to do that even if it's contrary to our thinking we can do it ourselves.

So, instead of trying to make John something we wish he were, instead of trying to fit him into the Christmas mode and watering him down for our culture, let's thank him for the difficult calling he was given, because if he doesn't call us to turnaround, than how would we be ready when Christ does come. Amen.