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First Presbyterian Church
December 9, 2018
Advent 3
Luke 3:1-16

“This is Joy?”

Theologians and preachers are often caught saying, “Advent is a season of preparation.” If this leaves you puzzled, just think about what it is you do to prepare for Christmas. At home, you’re probably getting out your Christmas decorations, purchasing and decorating your tree, hosting or attending parties, baking cookies, going to holiday concerts, buying presents, wrapping them and maybe even mailing them. This season always seems busier than normal with all of the stuff there is to do that requires extra preparation.

When Terry and I were getting ready for Thanksgiving dinner and hosting my sister and her family and my parents that weekend, we spent a lot of time preparing food and preparing our house. Our house needed a thorough cleaning and there were projects we wanted to get done, like touching up some paint, replacing a sink in the half bath, and cleaning the carpet. Now, I know that my family doesn’t care if the paint is touched up or the carpet is clean, but there’s something about the advent-or arrival-of guests, that prompts grown adults to examine their surroundings with a whole new perspective. Which means that suddenly that sink in the half bath will no longer do. Preparing for guests demands self-examination as much as it involves a “to do list”.

John the Baptist doesn’t seem like a character who would know much about preparing for houseguests or dinner guests. After all, he spent most of his time in the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey and calling people “brood of vipers”. That won’t exactly win you a lot of friends, if you know what I mean. I don’t know anyone who wants to hear John’s message of “repent, sinner” when we’re supposed to be celebrating “the most wonderful time of the year”. But here he is, calling us to repent and prepare. A little like those “road closed” and “merge” signs we Hoosiers see everywhere and try to avoid, there’s just no detour around them or

John. We've got to go through John to get to Bethlehem and the sweet baby Jesus.

John knew something, though, about preparing for the advent of God, which is why every December, John appears in the lectionary even though he's the most un-Christmasy fellow there is. It goes without saying that John was a real oddball. He ate odd things, he wore odd clothes, and he said odd things. And it's even odder still that the word of the Lord came to *him*. I mean, come on, the word of the Lord could have to come to anyone. Why, Luke lists off a bunch of important people the word of the Lord could have come to: the Emperor Tiberius, Governor Pilate, Herod the ruler of Galilee or his brother Philip, also a ruler-or Lysanias. He's a ruler too, you know. Why, the word of the Lord could have even come to the high priests Annas or Caiaphas. In fact, these people are so important **people** would have expected the word of the Lord to come to them. These people were the rulers of the world-the CEOs, presidents, kings, prime ministers of their day.

And yet, Luke tells us that the word of the Lord came to John, the son of Zechariah, who lived in the wilderness. This is not some throw away fact. Luke wants us to know that *this time*, things will be different, that change is afoot, and you better get ready for the big change. You better start preparing, John says, because change is coming. By the mere fact that the word of the Lord came to John and not the important people, tells us that big change was coming.

So what are we to do, the people asked? How are we to prepare for the arrival of Christ? The people who heard John's message asked this three times. The crowds asked, "What then should we do?" The tax collectors asked, "Teacher, what should we do?" And the soldiers asked, "And we, what should we do?"

Well, John had just told them what to do. "Repent!" he said. Repent! But repentance isn't something that comes naturally to people, so is it any wonder they asked him what to do after he'd just told them what to do? I mean, no one wants to have a finger wagged in their faces, especially at Christmas, but here's John doing just that. But repentance is important.

John knew that adults have a bad way of forming habits and ways of thinking that we need to change because these things hurt other people, and they're not in keeping with the way God wants us to treat other people. So we're called to repent, to turn away from ways of thinking and acting that are contrary to God, and embrace God's way of thinking and acting. This is why John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance; he knew that if we're going to follow in the ways of Jesus, we need to shed all those bad things that get in the way. Which isn't always music to some of our ears. We have a hard time facing the truth about ourselves and changing direction. We doesn't always welcome repentance and think of it as "good news!" like John did.

But prophets Like John have a way of telling us the truth, and forcing us to see what we'd rather not see, or have chosen to disregard. They have a way of sensing God's dream for the world, and holding it up to us. They have a way of casting a vision of a different day, a new day, a day God dreams of and so a day that must someday be. A day when the landscape will be rearranged by lifting up valleys and making paths in the desert and leveling the mountains and hills.

It almost sounds too crazy to be true.

But, what if it isn't crazy? What if people like you, and me, took John's message of repentance seriously, of really changing the patterns of behavior that contribute to the problems that occur in our relationships, communities and world?

Because you see repentance is more than just saying "I'm sorry"; repentance offers more than just an apology; repentance is a turning away from a pattern of behavior that caused the sin in the first place. Repentance, when done properly, leads to the soul-searching question: What then should we do?

You'll be glad to know that John gave very specific and practical examples of how to repent. His answers all involve acts of mercy and justice-which was very different advice than the people were used to hearing. To the crowd, he said "share". If you have two coats and someone else has none,

share. The same with your food, he adds. Share. To the tax collectors, he said “be fair.” “Don’t collect more money than the amount prescribed.” John must have known the tax collectors were prone to collecting more than their fair share. To the soldiers, he said be honest. “Don’t threaten people or falsely accuse them, don’t extort their money, and be happy with what you earn.” John must have known the soldiers grumbled about their job and sometimes abused their power.

For all John’s oddities, he appears to be a very practical person who gave very practical advice to the people who asked him, “How do we prepare and repent?” He instructed the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers to make unselfish choices, to do what is just, and to live within their means.

This is good, solid, practical advice. If you want to know how to repent prepare for the advent of Christ, follow John’s instructions. Share. Keep no more than you need. Be fair. Treat others with care.

When you walk by the Salvation Army kettle, deposit some money. Donate food to the food pantry-and donate good nutritious food. Don’t donate the yucky stuff. Donate the clothes in your closet you never wear, especially the warm clothes. It’s cold out there. Write a check. Organizations need your money. The people who work for the organizations that collect your clothes and canned goods need to be paid. It’s important work they do, so let’s not take it for granted. Be kind to people. Say thank you and please to the clerks in the stores. Call your friend you haven’t talked to in a long time. Let your dog sleep on the bed-you know she wants to! Write someone a thank you note. Tell your kids, your husband or wife or your parents, that you love them.

This is how you repent and prepare for the advent of Christ. I suppose you could make it harder than this, but you really don’t have to. It really doesn’t need to be all that complicated.

Last May, when Charlotte was getting ready to leave her old school, the principal read to all the students and their families Robert Fulghum’s book “All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten.”

As I read John's advice, I couldn't help but think of Fulghum's book. On the first page, Fulghum says that every spring he'd set to work writing his own credo, his own statement of personal belief-a statement of faith. When he was younger the statement ran for many pages, but as he grew older he realized that *it's just not that complicated*. Living it, however, is another matter.

Until last May, it had been a long time since I'd heard it. And so I share it with you this morning, in closing. Because preparing for the advent of Christ isn't that difficult. The difficulty comes in the living.

ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sand pile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and

sing and dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

Be aware of wonder.

Remember the little seed in the styrofoam cup:

The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.

And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

Take any of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to your family life or your work or your government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm. Think what a better world it would be if all - the whole world - had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess.

And it is still true, no matter how old you are - when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

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Found in Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten*, Villard Books: New York, 1990, page 6-7.