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First Presbyterian Church  
December 12, 2021  
Advent 3  
Luke 3:7-16

### **“The Work of Christmas”**

What do you say we begin this sermon by singing a well-known Christmas song? Don't make me sing it by myself . . . there's a reason I've never joined the choir after all these year!

Oh! You better watch out,  
You better not cry,  
You better not pout,  
I'm telling you why:  
Santa Claus is coming to town.

Ah yes, the quintessential Christmas song parents love. “You better be good. Santa's watching!” we say, as if that will make any difference in the long run. Years ago Charlotte caught on to it all at the young age of 4. “Mommy, I am not on the naughty list!” she announced one day. Being a generous child, she also let me know that Henry, Tommy and Julia weren't on the naughty list either. But the dog she wasn't so sure about.

You better watch out, you better not cry, you better pout – because Santa's coming. You know who else is coming? John the Baptist! The least Christmasy guy around who is the polar opposite of Santa.

John the Baptist is the least Christmas-y fellow there is yet every year he makes his appearance in the lead-up to Christmas. If Santa only delivers presents to good boys and girls, it's questionable whether John the Baptist is on that list. After all, he calls 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. But there's just no detour around John at

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

John knew something, though, about preparing for the advent of God, even though it goes without saying that John was a real oddball. He ate odd food, 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 (lai-SAY-nee-uhs). He's a ruler too, you know. Why, the word of the Lord could have even come to the high priests Annas (AN-uhs) or Caiaphas (KAI-uh-phus). 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, and prime ministers of their day.

And yet, Luke tells us that the word of the Lord came to John, who lived in the wilderness and was the son of Zechariah. This is not some throw away fact however. Luke wants us to know that *this time*, things will be different, that change is afoot, and you better watch out! Because Jesus is 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 our ears. We have a hard time facing the truth about ourselves and changing direction. We don'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 skimming off the top. 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 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. And cut people some slack; we're in the midst of a never-ending pandemic, and you never know what people are going through. Show some grace.

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.

Howard Thurman, a theologian and spiritual mentor, wrote a poem that sums up this message so well. It is titled "The Work of Christmas", and every year I repeat it because we all can use the reminder:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,*

*When the kings and princes are back home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoners  
To rebuild the nations  
To bring peace among people,  
To make music in the heart.*

That is the work of Christmas, and it is this work that John the Baptist calls us to and God wants us to be about . . .and not just in this season of goodwill and cheer, but every day. God, who loves us so much and comes to us, wants us to pour that love back into the world, to create a mighty force for justice and peace and kindness and compassion; and to be a people who because they know themselves loved by God, cannot help but love the world and live out their lives loving all of God's children.

Friends, it's Advent. And before you know it, the big day will be here. No matter who you are or what you've done or said or left undone or unsaid, God is coming for you – and lucky for us we don't believe in a Santa Claus God who only brings gifts to good boys and girls. But God does bring a gift in the form of Jesus Christ, and it's a gift far better than we deserve. So let us show our thanks by being about the work of Christmas, and preparing just like John said we should.

Amen.