

What Then Should We Do? – Ben Wayman

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

A pastor was hired to serve a church in a small logging community in Montana. The pastor quickly discovered that many people in his congregation were stealing logs from the river that had been harvested up north and sent downstream. To care for his church, the pastor preached that Sunday on Christ's command to *love our neighbor as ourselves*. The congregation appreciated the sermon and told the preacher so after the service.

The following week the pastor was surprised to find the people's practice had not changed: they continued poaching logs from the river. The following Sunday he preached on the eighth commandment, *thou shalt not steal*. The congregation was effusive in their praise: "Pastor, we're so glad you're here. You're just what we've been wanting in a preacher."

The pastor was shocked when he observed the following week that the congregation was back at its old ways, stealing logs with gusto from the river. "That's it," the pastor said to himself, "I know what to preach this Sunday."

That Sunday the pastor delivered a sermon about *loving your neighbor by not stealing your neighbor's logs from the river*. After the service the pastor was informed that his services were no longer needed.

Pastors learn early on that it's the application bit of the sermon that will get them canned. That's because as soon as you connect the dots, as soon as you make a move in your sermon that connects the gospel with people's actual lives, you are playing with Holy Spirit fire. Holy Spirit fire is dangerous because it changes you. Holy Spirit fire changes you by preparing you for friendship with God. But if you don't want to be changed, you will do everything in your power to put it out.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Advent is the time the church sets aside to prepare for Jesus's coming. Our willingness to be changed makes all the difference for whether we will be ready for Jesus. And on this third Sunday of Advent, Paul reminds us in his letter to the church in Philippi: *the Lord is near*.

This morning I'll focus primarily on our Gospel lesson. I'd like to suggest that our preparation for Jesus this Advent season requires that our whole person change in order for us to receive Jesus with joy. Too often we treat Advent preparation as a heart thing or maybe, at most, a head thing. But what's needed is more than a head trip or a warm heart. Preparing for Jesus's arrival requires a whole person change.

We need to change because, as Isaiah tells us, the great one in our midst is the Holy One. We must become a holy people to enjoy the friendship of a holy God. If Jesus's presence among us will be a thing of joy rather than judgment, then we must be changed. If we are prepared for Jesus's coming, his arrival will be good news—not because we won't be burned by

unquenchable fire (though that's good)—but because we will be full of joy that the Lord has come.

Luke's version of John the Baptist's announcement to prepare for Jesus is different from Matthew and Mark's in several ways, but especially in its practical, economical character. At no other time is our money-obsessed, consumeristic culture on greater display than the Christmas season. We have our work cut out for us in these final days before Christmas. And Luke is going to help us with that.

In Luke's version of the story, John the Baptist addresses the crowds that have come to be baptized, not the religious leaders. By focusing on everyday people, he becomes the people's prophet. Here it's the crowd that gets called a *brood of vipers*. It's interesting that the crowd is more open to John's sermon than Matthew's Pharisees and Sadducees seem to be.

In response to John's call for repentance, for a changed way of living, the crowd responds: *What then should we do?* John gives three different answers tailored to three different groups of people, each of which are instructive in helping us prepare for Jesus's coming. **“What then should we do?”** will be our question this morning as we prepare for Jesus' coming.

John's first answer is directed to the crowd: **SHARE YOUR STUFF**, he tells them. Share your coats and food. He's very specific and practical. If you have two coats, give one to someone who has none. Do the same with your food. John uses the imperative here: you must give your extra coat to someone who has none. There are some passages and instructions in Scripture meant to be read metaphorically. This is not one of them. Share your stuff. Remember that people are created in God's image and are of infinite value; your Patagonia puff coat is not. John is showing us a way to fill valleys of need from mountains of excess.

Just last Saturday, our community had a coat drive. What a wonderful Advent event! John would be proud. Sharing coats and food is a work of our hands. It requires knowing our neighbors in need and, sometimes, community-organizing for neighbors we don't know well. How we share is a witness that God sets us free from our possessions. The best way to demonstrate this freedom is by opening our hands to share our stuff with others in need.

As a parent, but particularly as a Christian, I am elated when my boys share. I especially celebrate when they share something they don't have much of, or when they share extravagantly. This kind of sharing displays what it means to be people capable of being Jesus's friends. Of course, at times children can be slow to share, and such times provide us adults an opportunity to look in the mirror and at the myriad ways in which we adults are not so great at sharing. In our community here in Greenville we have neighbors without homes, clothes, and food. We must share. Our readiness to receive Jesus depends on it. One of the ways we help each other prepare for Jesus is by offering each other opportunities for sharing our stuff.

John's second answer is directed to tax collectors: **BE FINANCIALLY HONEST**, he says. Don't charge more than the set amount. Tax collectors were known for taking advantage of others, and they were in a line of work that lent itself to such abuses without accountability. But John's response applies to all of us, whether we're children or adults, employed or not. We must

be a people who are honest about charges, payments, and debts. How we handle our money prepares us for Jesus and holy friendship with God.

When I was eight or so my brother and I kept our savings money in two little clay jars in my parents' bedroom. I can remember on at least one occasion removing a bill from my brother's jar and placing it in my own. Money had taken a hold of me, and I stole from my own brother.

Because money is so prevalent in our lives, we are faced, time and again, with opportunities to be honest with our money. Pastor and theologian Will Willimon says that "we are often nowhere more self-deceptive than when we are dealing with money" (*Calling & Character*, p. 102). Willimon suggests that how Christians handle their money is a clear way of demonstrating our discipleship. Speaking to pastors about their need to tithe, he says, "Our giving to the church and its work ought to be exemplary in its effusiveness. We thereby not only demonstrate Christian stewardship in a society that encourages greed, but we also witness to the possibility that our lives and our possessions are not our own" (p. 104).

John the Baptist's call for financial honesty is an invitation for us to prepare for Jesus's coming by setting us free from money's grip. How do we demonstrate Christian generosity in a culture consumed by greed and consumption? Are there people, communities, or groups you have overcharged or stolen from because you were in the grip of money?

Today we are invited to prepare for Jesus's coming by being financially honest. Sharing our things and honestly dealing with others is the work of our whole person. Honesty in our money handling helps us develop habits of thought whereby money becomes a means for friendship and freedom in Christ rather than a goal in itself. We prepare for Jesus's coming by rejecting greed and becoming a people who treats others honestly, looking to their best interest before our own. This, Paul tells us earlier in his letter to the Christians in Philippi, is what it means to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:3-5).

John's third answer to the question of what we should do to prepare for Jesus is directed to the soldiers: **BE SATISFIED WITH YOUR WAGES**, he says. Here John gives a twofold response: don't shake down others and be satisfied with your wages. John knows that soldiers often extorted others as a way to "make up" for their minimal pay. And so he called out their bullying, framing, and threatening people to extract money from them. Extortion still happens today, to be sure, but having the means to extort others is perhaps unique to particular jobs. What is not unique is dissatisfaction with wages.

In his direction to be satisfied with your wages, John the Baptist offers first-century soldiers and us today a life-changing gift. How would your life change—not merely your outlook on your job, but your whole life change—if you stopped obsessing about your wages and simply made peace with them? How often do you justify your failure to be generous to others because you are dissatisfied with your wages? How much energy do you spend being disappointed by the bonus that never came, or the long overdue raise? *Be satisfied with your wages*, John says. And in this simple response, John shows us how to be set free for gratitude and joy.

A theme that spans throughout our readings this morning is a call to joy. *Rejoice! Sing praises to the Lord*, Zephaniah and Isaiah tell us, because God is in our midst. And God, they tell us, will *remove disaster...deal with all your oppressors...save the lame...gather the outcast...bring you home...[and] restore your fortunes*. In a word, God will **save** you. And because God has saved us, we can be satisfied with our wages.

The song from Isaiah this morning is a familiar one at Morning Prayer. The opening line is the one I've learned to lean into: *Surely **God** is my salvation*. Emphasis on *God*. Because God is our salvation, we can be satisfied with our wages. Because God is our salvation, we can be honest with our money even when it costs us. Because God is our salvation, we can share our clothes, food, and everything else we have with others in need.

And that's because God is enough. Theologically, speaking, God is too much. Our failures to share, be financially honest, and satisfied with our wages are a theological problem that implies that there is not enough God to sustain us. But this morning, John invites us to prepare ourselves for life with God who gives us everything we need.

And this is why Paul tells the church in Philippi and us that we don't need to worry about anything, which surely comes as good news this Advent season. When Paul tells us we don't need to worry anymore, he isn't some deluded idealist. Remember, Paul is writing from prison. In this letter he talks about his sufferings with Christ. Paul is no stranger to suffering, meager wages, or the threat of death. Rather, Paul's worry has been overcome because he knows God is near.

That's the good news this Advent season: God is near. But here's the rub. This is not good news if you are not prepared for Jesus. If we had kept reading today's passage in Luke, we would read in verses 19-20: *But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by [John] because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison*. Herod rejected the good news because he rejected the change it would require of him. In his refusal to repent, Herod did everything in his power to put out the Holy Spirit fire by throwing John in prison.

Advent is a season of preparation for all people. Whether our preparations are for judgment or joy is up to us. We live in a world that rejected John's proclamation and continues to reject Jesus. We live in a world that is provoked by the gospel and aggressively responds to it with imprisonment, silencing, marginalizing, and outright violence. Today we are invited to receive Jesus's coming as good news as we prepare for his coming by living lives of radical trust in God and not money or stuff.

This Advent, we are invited to prepare our whole person for Jesus's arrival. We must not only think differently but *be* different. **Rejoice, Church! The Lord is near.**