

ADVENT ETHICS
Luke 3:1-18
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, December 8, 2013

Try to imagine Christmas totally stripped of all its commercialism and sentimentality. In this parallel universe there are no Christmas parties or gift giving, no Christmas decorations or Christmas trees, no Bing Crosby singing “White Christmas.” Instead, Christmas Day is almost just like any other day, the only difference being Christians gather together to commemorate Christ’s birth. Yes, there’s still Christmas carols, scripture readings and story telling, but only the biblical stories surrounding the birth of the Christ child and meditations on how God’s love for the world changed everything.

This was how Christmas was observed in Puritan America. In fact, in the Massachusetts Bay Colony “celebrating” Christmas was against the law not because the Puritans didn’t believe in the incarnation (God becoming one of us) but in reaction to the out of control Christmas celebrations back home in England which usually became drunken spectacles that ended in street riots. If that’s hard to imagine, think of the drunken riots that sometime break out after the home team wins the Super Bowl.

Two hundred years later, Charles Dickens’ story, *A Christmas Carol*, had a lot to do with domesticating Christmas into a day when families and friends would go to church and then return home for a Christmas feast with gifts for the children, but as each generation passed new Christmas traditions slowly emerged and then evolved and are now set in stone today. Maybe we don’t have drunken riots in the streets, but no one can deny Jesus’ birthday has stiff competition.

That’s precisely why Christians need Advent, to prepare not just for December 25th but a new way of life, centered in Christ, 365 days of the year. That’s why I invited you to imagine Christmas as a primarily Christian observance without all the extra glitz. And that’s also why the second Sunday of Advent lectionary readings include warnings against losing this primary focus so we can stay on track.

John the Baptist seems an odd and unwelcome intrusion into our Christmas preparations. You don’t hear any hint of Merry Christmas in his voice, only stark demands for repentance and justice. But even though John’s warnings are hard to hear, it’s essential we listen to him so Christ can be born in our hearts by faith.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the foot of the trees; every tree without fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:7-9)

Let's set the scene. Jesus, at about thirty years of age, was about to begin his public ministry, and it was John's job to get things ready by preaching all's not right with the world. John was a prophetic voice, a truth teller, who held up a mirror for everybody to see themselves, warts and all. But the amazing thing is, John's truth telling was almost universally welcomed. How else can you explain large crowds of people going miles out of their way into the middle of nowhere only to be called a pack of snakes and instead of denying it, honestly asking, "Then what should we do about it?"

Let's give these people a lot of credit. The immediate reaction to criticism is usually becoming insulted and defensive. We don't like it when a second party accurately exposes our faults. Usually that's when the, "Who do you think you are?" and the "How dare you!" syndrome kicks in. But not this time, John's listeners accepted his verdict without complaint and then asked for specific instructions how to turn things around. John quickly obliged them.

"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has one and whoever has food must do likewise. To the tax collectors in the crowd he answered, "Collect no more than the amount proscribed to you." To the soldiers who came he said, "Do not extort money by threats or false accusations and be satisfied with your wages."

Of course all these specific instructions could be summed up in one word, repent. Stop doing what you've been doing and do it differently. Turn away from your destructive and dishonest behaviors and start acting like God's child.

Ever hear the poem by Robert Fulgham, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten?*

..."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 sorry when you hurt somebody... Live a balanced life; Learn some and think some... When you go out into the world... Hold hands and stick together... Be aware of wonder."

This poem is actually a crash course in Ethics 101, ethics being the basic moral principals and values governing the way we're supposed to live together in community. A close read of the Old Testament prophets show most of their preaching centered on repenting, then reclaiming these basic universal principals. Of course, Jesus neatly summed it all up in one succinct commandment, "Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself." Follow that golden rule and you're not far from the Kingdom of God

But Advent and Christmas isn't just about good ethics (Share everything... Play fair, Don't hit, etc.) it's also about being aware of wonder. Luke picks up on this theme:

"As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah, John answered them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Luke 3:15-18)

We need friends like John the Baptist who can tell us the truth and hold us accountable, but we also need to know there's someone else, even more powerful, who comes into our world every day bringing grace and truth. His name is Jesus.

Luke gives the only good explanation for the people not turning against John when he called them a brood of vipers. First, deep down they knew John was right, but they also knew they were ripe and ready for God. Luke wrote, "As the people were filled with expectation..."

Expectation is the key word here. They had a mental picture of the future. They anticipated something awesome and wonderful was about to happen. The heavens were about to birth a prodigy beyond their imagination. Why else would John the Baptist appear out of nowhere and preach with a prophetic authority absent from Israel for hundreds of years? God was up to something, they could feel it in their bones. God was on the move, about to revisit his people and they wanted to be ready.

I hope this isn't true, but I fear too many of us get so caught up in our holiday preparations, along with our normal schedules and multiple worries, we've forgotten how to simply be in awe and wonder. There's no real spirit of expectation, only uncertainty. I'm not saying we've become Grinches and Scrooges, we're just lost, confused and overwhelmed by our unpleasant realities, trying to get by on our own will power.

These are exactly the people Christ was born to love and save and part of our Advent preparations include becoming aware of God calling us to repentance and then living the ethic John the Baptist preached. Share what you have with anybody who has nothing. Play fair, don't hit. Clean up your own mess. Don't take what isn't yours. Say sorry when you hurt someone. Live a balanced life. Hold hands and stick together. Be aware of wonder.

These are the ethics of Advent. Repent and then put them into practice. And if anyone ever questions your Advent ethics because you've taken John the Baptist's preaching seriously and you're doing what he said, give God the glory and tell them about Jesus, born for us and our salvation.

Of course it doesn't always come so easily being a witness of the coming Kingdom of God and of its Christ. Sometimes it's difficult seeing any signs of God's Kingdom because today's world is as fragmented as it was when John the Baptist first prepared the way. So maybe we're being called on to focus on the tension and misery polarizing our world and then step right into the middle of it with the expectation and the hope, God is already with us and waiting for us to make the next move and do something important.

A once influential inner city church was now surrounded by blocks of abandoned buildings, poverty, prostitutes and drug dealers. Most other congregations relocated to the suburbs, but this church remained committed to the neighborhood. They started an after school ministry, parenting classes and Bible studies in people's homes.

“Why are you wasting your time?” the naysayers asked. “No doubt you’re doing some good, but practically speaking, nothing’s changed, the neighborhood’s still a wreck.”

One member responded, “That may be true, but we know our Bible and we know our Lord, so we know how it ends. Maybe we’re not there yet, but knowing how it ends, that’s what keeps us going!”

May God bless us with that same fierce faith as we do our small part to prepare the way for the time when Christ and his Kingdom will come and God’s will is always done on earth as it is in heaven.