

December 6, 2009

Scripture: Luke 3:1-18

Sermon: "The Sounds of Christmas: Cha-ching, Cha-ching"

We are into our second week of Advent and we know that holiday happenings are already under way. And we know that as we go through all the holiday happenings, we find ourselves surrounded by the sounds of the season. Christmas carols fill our radio airwaves. Commercials sing out with gusto: Buy Me, Make your family happy. If you don't buy this item, you will ruin Christmas for everyone. And of course, who can ignore one of the loudest sounds of Christmas: the moaning and groaning that goes along with searching for that gift for that hard to shop for person. The sounds of Christmas fill our air and create a cacophony of noise: cash registers, credit card machines, choruses of Buy, Buy, Buy!

These are the sounds of Christmas that invade our lives. These are the sounds that supposedly help "get us into the Christmas spirit". These are the sounds that surround us as we as people of faith continue on our Advent journey and prepare for the coming of the Lord.

These are the sounds of Christmas that continually try to drown out the voice of one calling from the wilderness sharing the words from the prophet Isaiah that we hear today in our Scripture. These are the sounds that continually try to silence this voice of one that says "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight his paths. And understand that all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

And as we as people of faith continue our journey through Advent and try to reclaim Advent as a time of worship and compassion, not consumerism and consumption, the question we face is how do we go about making the "sounds of Christmas" quiet down and begin opening ourselves to that voice in the wilderness that calls us to prepare for the coming of the Lord. We find ourselves in a very tight spot. We are caught between two worlds: a secular world that has the chorus of consumerism as its theme song and between a faith/church world that is calling us to slow down, prepare for the King and as uncomfortable as it seems, it is also calling us to repent, a word that makes us squirm in our seats, a word that honestly reminds us of the dark, dreary season of Lent, a word that flashes images of ashes and sackcloth, a word that brings to mind images that could not be further from the beautiful, joyous colors of this season.

This voice is calling us to repent amidst the sounds of Christmas. Through the chorus of cash registers, we hear the voice calling us to repent. And we find ourselves caught between two worlds as we struggle to find a balance especially this time of year so we look to our Scriptures to bring us a word of hope, a word of calm and a word of strength. And today our Scripture offers up words from John the Baptist.

John the Baptist? How does he fit into the picture? Sure he is Jesus' cousin but he doesn't quite make it to our manger scene. What does this wooly, unkempt, unclean desert prophet have to do with reclaiming Advent as a time of worship and compassion, not consumerism and consumption? What does John the Baptist have to do with cash registers?

And for the answer to these questions and to understand why he is invited to travel along with us on our Advent journey, we must really listen to what he is saying. In our Scriptures today, we

find John surrounded by lots and lots of people. And they have all gathered around him to hear him preach. And as he is teaching, he is reminding them of the words from the prophet Isaiah and he is reminding them of their covenant with God. He is reminding them that the God they worship and claim is a God judgment and justice. Sure he may go about in an interesting way, using very colorful and powerful images. He calls them a brood of vipers. He talks about the axe of God already at the root, ready to cut down the trees that don't bear fruit. He talks about being baptized with fire. And to be honest, these are probably not the words that we want to hear today or really associate with the Advent season. They don't bring us comfort and joy. And they certainly don't bring us peace on this Sunday of Peace. And as we hear these words from John the Baptist we struggle for a word of grace. So for us to find this word of grace, peace, comfort, joy, and yes, justice, we have to look at the whole of what John says while he is preaching to the crowd. And when we do this we see that he is reminding the crowd of the importance of reclaiming their relationship with God as the people of God. He wants them to understand that the Lord is coming and the time where everything will be made right is near at hand, that the one who will make the rich poor and the poor rich, who will make the mighty weak and the weak might is coming soon. And he wants them to make their hearts ready. They must create within themselves a clean heart. The people of God must once again remember their covenant with God.

He reminds them that they must remember for God to hold true to God's promises and for God to be a God of justice, then God will also have to be a God of judgment. So he is calling them to repent and to prepare. And as they prepare and repent, John wants the crowd to understand that what we do matters as people of faith, how we live our lives matters as people of faith, our actions, our words, our deeds matter as people of faith. we are called to live out a faith that is grounded in caring for all of God's children and seeing to their needs because we have a covenant with God as God's people.

In our Scriptures today, John is telling the crowds that he has heard all of their claims: We are children of Abraham. I believe in God. That should be enough for God. That should be good enough for God. And he responds by saying, that's not enough because if God wanted to, God could make these stones into people of Abraham and they would be no different than you and me.

So he goes on to say to the crowd that Words are not enough. Connection to the past is not enough. Being a part of the "right" community is not enough. The messiah is coming and being a child of Abraham in name only is not enough for salvation, having the right possessions is not enough. Grace won't and can't be found in possessions or names or even who you know, like it is found in this world. We are called to a different way of life based on the principles of the Kingdom of God.

And the crowd is so amazed that they ask what do we need to do to prepare. How do we make ourselves ready for the coming of the Lord? And John says Repent and bear fruit worthy of repentance.

So he says repentance is more than saying I'm sorry. When we as people of faith truly practice repentance, it is forgiveness of sins but it is also more. It involves a change. It involves a social

responsibility. It involves striving to do everything we do with integrity. It involves realigning our lives “towards God’s future salvation and towards [God’s Kingdom] right down to our doing work, our possessions, and our behavior.”

John reminds the crowd that it is not enough to simply say “I believe in God”. That as people of faith, their actions, their attitude, everything that they do, including ordinary, everyday, mundane tasks, must reflect an attitude that “flows out of a relationship with God and with others.”

And he also invites us today to realize that as we prepare for the Lord, we are called to repent and we are to live out the Gospel message in our lives. And the simple fact is that the Gospel message is “giving every man, woman, and child what they deserve, not necessarily what they want, but what they deserve simply because they are a child of God.” Every woman, man, and child deserves a right to food, a right to a decent job, a right to decent housing, and a right to be treated with respect.

Not because they want these things. Not because it is the right thing to do. Every man, woman and child deserve these things because they are a child of God.

And so John tells the crowd, repent, bear fruit worthy of repentance. If you have two coats, give one away. Be fair in all your dealings with each other. Don’t bully. And be respectful to all because we are all a child of God.

Prepare for the coming of the Lord by living out right relationships in everything that we do: from the things we buy, to our co-workers, to our family, to our friends, to the strangers that we meet on the street. Prepare for the coming of the Lord by living out right relationships with one another.

Repent and bear fruit worthy of repentance. The Good News and the word of grace is that we practice a faith that demands justice and we practice a faith that does justice. And so this wooly, unkempt, unclean desert prophet reminds us today that as we continue our Advent journey and as we prepare for the coming Lord, we are called to look at our lives and look at our relationships and question: Do all of our actions, all of our words, everything that we do come out of a foundation that rests securely in the commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves? Are we preparing for the coming of the Lord by living out right relationships? Are we truly practicing a faith that demands and does justice for all of God’s children?

We are surrounded by a cacophony of sounds during this time of year: cash registers ringing up sales, credit card machines sliding through the card reader, the creaky burden of debt that piles up surrounding the holiday, the cries and worries of how are we going to pay for all of these things? And the loudest cry of all: the chorus of Buy, Buy, Buy.

Today John is inviting us to stop and really listen to the true sounds of the season. He is inviting us to stop and really listen to the voice that cries out in the wilderness. He is inviting to stop and really listen to the true message of the season that the Lord is coming so that all flesh can and will find salvation in the Lord.

Prepare the Way! The Lord is coming. Make straight the crooked paths. Do justice. Love your neighbor. Make right the relationships for all the children of God.

Live out a faith of justice and peace. If you have two coats, give one away. Be fair in all of our dealings. And live out the Gospel message of hope, peace and grace.

These are the true sounds of Christmas that help get us into the Christmas mood. These are the true sounds of Christmas that define the season of peace, love, and hope. These are the true sounds of Christmas that call us to be people of faith in all our actions and in all of our deeds.

May we listen to the true sounds of Christmas as we prepare for the coming of the Lord and find peace and comfort in their chorus. Amen.

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