

"Christmas on Our Terms"

Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-16

St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church, Columbus
December 10, 2017—2nd Sunday of Advent—Rev. Ronald Botts

John the Baptist was the kind of person you could hardly miss. He was an ascetic, living off the land, and wearing only the simplest of garb. His hair was probably unkempt; his eyes penetrating. John was all business because he believed that God had given him a message to proclaim. There was no time to waste.

So every day he preached in the countryside and gathered large crowds around him. Some were drawn out of serious intent; others probably came just for the show. Perhaps a few even heckled him or made fun of this curious man.

No matter how he was received, it didn't deter him. John's charge was to call people to an immediate, deeper relationship with God. To do this, he said, they needed to have an entire change of heart, a whole new outlook on life. They had to come to terms with their sins. As a sign of this promised new life John immersed them in water so that they would have a dramatic experience of being spiritually cleansed and prepared to go forward.

What troubled John, however, was that many came to him asking to be baptized but they wanted it on **their** terms. These folks sought to receive God's favor, but they didn't want to make any substantive changes in their lives. John was clear, though. You have to rid yourself of the old before you are ready to accept the new. You have to clear out the obstacles from your past in order to advance. It has to be on **God's** terms, not yours.

In today lesson he addresses some of those present and calls them "snakes" | because of their lack of sincerity. John knew how to use language for greatest impact—sharp words to penetrate the hard shells people had built up around themselves. He would make no concessions in his standards just to increase the number of those baptized. He was serious and wanted evidence that they were serious.

They asked him what they must do, and he replied: "If you have two coats, then you must share the one with someone who hasn't any. And the same thing goes for food—share it!"

Then some came with more specific questions. There were tax collectors who wanted to be baptized. They were petty bureaucrats, deputized to receive certain of the taxes imposed by the Romans. The tax collectors were despised by their countrymen for their collusion and for their practice of padding the take. To these John instructed, "Collect no more than the amount authorized for you."

There were also native soldiers hired to fill out the regular Roman troops. Often they supplemented their wages by intimidating people and demanding protection money and bribes. When they wanted to be baptized, John told them directly, "Don't extort money from the people by threatening them or by false accusations; be content with your wages."

John was straightforward with his words and told the people exactly what they needed to do to prepare themselves. He also impressed upon them that this was the time to decide, not somewhere months or years down the line. This was the day to make themselves right with God. It wasn't something to put off.

John was a powerful man, clearly filled with the Spirit, and so some began to speculate that he might be the one promised of old who would deliver them. John was quite aware of their feelings, but he knew that his role was that of messenger and not of Messiah.

"Friends," he said, "I baptize you with water, but one whose power will far exceed mine | is coming. He will be so mighty that I won't even be worthy of doing the most menial thing to serve him. Now when he comes, he will baptize you again with the Holy Spirit and with a fire that will purge away all sin. This is the one to watch for."

John's work was to proclaim the coming Kingdom of God and to get people ready to recognize it and participate **in** it. He set out the requirements for travelling the path to that kingdom. And what he said was to travel light, to get rid of the baggage that slows you down and keeps you from you goal. One has to be quick to react to the bends in the road ahead.

Did he want people to become an ascetic like himself? I don't think so. The outward person didn't particularly matter to him. What was important was the inner person. He continually stressed getting rid of the things weighing individuals down, slowing them along life's journey. John might have said, "Clear the path ahead; remove the obstacles in your way. Intention and action must go together. How will you recognize and follow the Messiah tomorrow | unless you prepare yourselves today?"

One night a young man had an argument with his girl outside a theater in a small town. He became so angry that he stomped down the street, and needing to take his anger out on something, he broke off the antennas on a whole line of parked cars. Someone recognized him and he was arrested and brought to court.

There the judge imposed a jail sentence, but said he would suspend it if the young man would locate all the victims, apologize, and make restitution. So he took out an ad in the local paper, indicated regret for his actions, and promised to reimburse each one for the damage. This fellow quickly sized up his situation, realized his mistake, and took the appropriate steps to clear the way for his release and to go on with his life.

Now if we want release from what holds us back in matters of the spirit, it requires that we also be actively involved. Our initial step is to take responsibility for who we are and what we do. We must see ourselves, for both the good and the not-so-good about us. These obstacles in our way must then be cleared away so that we can move ahead freely. And even when they are put aside, sometimes they have a way of coming back again on us. That, too, we have to be prepared for.

If we were transported back in time and standing before John, I wonder what he might say to us? What things might he point out that keep us from a fuller relationships with God?

Perhaps he might tell you that your greatest obstacle is indifference. You say faith is important. You come to church. But you don't put your heart into it. To this person John might say, "Wake up, friend. Life doesn't go on forever. If not now, when are you going to change? Recognize indifference and move it out of your way."

Perhaps John might say to you that your primary obstacle is distraction. You've got great intentions. You have big plans. But when it comes to your spiritual life, you get shaken off course by other things which grab your attention. To this person John might say, "Look at yourself, friend. Don't you see what's happening? Your road map is good, but you keep getting off on the side streets. Set your direction and stick to it."

Perhaps John might say to you that your primary obstacle is lack of knowledge. You don't understand enough about faith to know what you want to do. You don't spend time equipping yourself and deepening your understanding. You think it will just come without any effort. To this person John might say, "Wise up, friend. You spend lots of time learning about other things, but you know so little about what's really important. Invest some of your time and energy in study and prayer, then move ahead with your life."

Perhaps John might say to you that your most obvious obstacle is self-centeredness. You talk a lot about giving. You recognize the value of self-sacrifice. But when it comes down to the bottom line, you most always choose yourself over others. To this person John might say, "Think about it, friend. You tell people they're important, but you seldom choose to show it if you're at all inconvenienced. Become more sensitive to others, see their needs, then change your priorities accordingly."

Perhaps John might say to you that your most main obstacle is anger. You regard yourself as a peaceable person; yet, you let the least things rile you in dealing with people every day. To this person John might say, "Consider, friend, your behavior toward those with whom you disagree or who irk you in some small way. The next person struggles with life as much as you. Cut them some slack, think before you speak, and treat them as you'd like to be treated."

John helps us yet today to see that any of these things, or dozens of others, can get in the way for us. Any of these could keep us from moving ahead.

The truth is... the obstacles that put distance between ourselves and God are largely those we put there ourselves. With God's help, however, we can clear them out of the way. Advent may be a time of waiting, but it can be put to work in preparing for what needs to come next in our life.

If Christ is to be born anew for us this year, we need to be ready to follow him wherever he will lead. And to do this well, the path ahead needs to be made clear and ready.

What might be in your way? What's in mine? How ready are we to step into the fullness of life he promises?

Consider today... What do I yet have to do to receive and act on the great gift he is bringing to me this year?