

“Twas.....A Few Days Before Christmas”
Luke 3:1-14/Isaiah 12:1-6
FPC/December 13, 2009/3rd Sunday of Advent
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I. Introduction

Twas a few days before Christmas, and all through the land,
Craziness abounded, deadlines were at hand.
What sizes? Who’s coming? And should we send them a card?
Somehow these days before Christmas had become especially hard.

Getting ready for Christmas.....it often means the stress of extra busyness and “to do” lists. Advent, itself, means a time of preparation.....a time of getting ready.....but sometimes I wonder if I’m really getting ready for the right things. Sometimes I wonder if my “Advent getting ready” isn’t a little off target. Do you ever wonder about that?

I was thinking about that as I read our text from Luke this morning. It’s a text about John the Baptist.....about getting ready for the coming of God’s salvation, and God’s Savior. And as I listened to it, I started to hear a dialogue, that went something like this.....

II. Scripture/Dialogue: Luke 3:1-14 (paraphrased with additions)

A1-I remember when I first heard John. It was when Roman Emperor Tiberius was still on the throne, and when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and when Herod still ruled Galilee.

B1-And weren’t Anna and Caiaphas the high priests then?

A2-Yep, I’m sure they were.

B2-I suppose the point is that John was not just some character in a story, or someone’s prophetic hope. He was real.....a real man in a real place at a real time in history. God acted in the real world.....our world.....through John.

A3-It was sort of like the prophets from ages ago; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos. You know, the book of Isaiah begins with; “The vision of Isaiah in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. (Is. 1:1) The other books of the prophets start the same way

B3-John is like them: The words of John in the days of Tiberius, Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas. John is like the ancient prophets, grounded in real history, and announcing the coming of God’s salvation....preparing us for the way of God.

A4-From the very beginning John told us that. He said his baptism was for the repentance of sins.....forgiveness and getting ready for a new way.....like cleaning the house, and awaiting the arrival of a guest.

B4-John was getting us ready. We thought of the words from Isaiah 40: "A voice crying in the wilderness; 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"

A5-"Fix the roads.....fill in the low spots.....flatten out the high spots.....straighten out the curves.....smooth out the rough places."

B5-"Because the salvation of God is coming.....coming for all to see." (Isaiah 40:3-5)

A6-It was like getting everything ready for a parade. Isaiah prophesied the coming of God's salvation.....and it came.

B6-And we believed John was doing the same thing.

A7-Lots of people believed John. Lots of people came out to hear him....all types and kinds. Do you remember what he said?

B7-Sure: "You are like a den of snakes fleeing the coming fire." I bet you won't find that on a Christmas card.

A8-His point was that that the coming of God's salvation would be different than people expected. It would include judgment and new life. Getting ready meant changing your life. He called it "bearing fruit of repentance."

B8-Some people thought being a Jew, and growing up in the heritage was enough. They thought they l'm in, and others were out....just like the self-righteous fools the prophets spoke against years ago.

A9-And wow.....John would have none of that. He said, "Being children of Abraham.....part of the Jewish people.....means nothing. God can make children of Abraham out of these stones. What matters is repentance.....getting ready...changing your life."

B9-He said, "Trees that don't produce fruit are cut down and thrown into the fire." We knew what he meant.

A10-And so people started asking him how they might get ready....how to prepare for the coming of God's salvation and power.

B10-I asked, "How do I get ready?" John said, "Do you have an extra coat, and some extra food.....give it to those who have neither. Share."

A11-Tax collectors got into the mix, and they asked about getting ready. I was hoping John would say, "Forget it.....get ready for the fire." But he said, "Don't cheat people. Collect only the taxes that are due." And I thought, "Wow.....this salvation of God might also include them."

B11-And then one of the Roman soldiers standing around the edge of the crowd shouted out, "What about us?" It got real silent then. John stopped and stared at the soldier who spoke. He said, "Don't use your power to blackmail people. Be content with your wages." I guess God's salvation might include them too.

A12-The questions and answers continued for a while. Most people were stunned. John, like an ancient prophet, was proclaiming the coming of God's salvation. It was what we hoped and prayed for.....but what John proclaimed was also different.

B12-Being part of the heritage didn't matter. Growing up Jewish didn't matter. What mattered was getting ready. What mattered was a changed life. What mattered was caring, sharing and justice. What mattered was bearing the fruit of repentance.

A13-And the salvation of God was different than we thought it would be. John said it would exclude some people who thought they were in, and include some people who thought they were out.

B13-I was surprised. I thought about my own life, and what it meant to "bear fruit of repentance." And I thought it best to slow down.....pay attention.....watch and listen for the salvation of God.....for the Savior, whom John said was coming.

III. Reflections

Getting ready.....I was thinking about a something that happened couple years ago. There was a lot of talk going around then about "putting Christ back in Christmas." Maybe you remember this story. After having their Christmas decoration up for about a week, Panera Bread took them down. Some of the regular folks who have coffee in Panera Bread every morning thought there was a problem. They thought their Panera Bread was folding to the secular pressures of the season by taking their Christmas decorations down. And so they stood outside with signs picketing....."Put Christ back in Christmas." The Sharon Herald was there.....it was front page news. A couple days later there was another story. It seems that the Panera Bread decorations were taken down, because new ones were on there way.....and just got delayed. So in a few days the new decorations were up, and the picketers were back at their tables drinking coffee. The crisis was over. I guess Christ got put back in Christmas. I guess Panera Bread was ready for Christmas. I guess the creeping powers of secularism were beaten back. I guess it was a win for our side.....or for someone's side.

But as I was listening to John in this text, and thinking about my own getting ready for Christmas, I wondered about what really happened at Panera Bread. We've got our decorations up. Christmas cards are going out. I'm listening to Christmas music, and have been for a couple weeks. We're trying to get our Christmas schedule firmed up; when kids are coming and going (and coming again). We're still working on gifts. Getting ready for Christmas.....all of those things do matter. But is that all it is? Is Christ put back in Christmas when the decorations go up, like Panera Bread? Is that the type of Advent preparation John is talking about?

I think that when John talks about getting ready.....about preparation for the Advent of God's salvation.....about bearing fruit of repentance.....about caring and sharing and justice.....when he looks me he's talking about something more than gifts, decorations, cards and music. This past week I went over to see some folks from Grace Chapel Church do their food in back pack mission. There are kids at Hermitage Elementary who eat breakfast and lunch at school, and during the weekends often have little or nothing to eat. To address the need Grace Chapel works with the school and Community Food Warehouse to put simple, healthy food in the kids' back packs for the weekend. There are the same needs, if not more, in Sharon. I am hoping that we can work with Case Elementary and Community Food Warehouse to do the same mission beginning next fall. We're just starting to work on that. I don't know for sure, but I think John would say that's getting ready for Christmas.

I remember making a pastoral call a few years ago. After over 40 years of marriage Fran's husband had died. She was having a difficult time coming back to church. It was something they had done together, and she imagined that in coming alone she would feel the loss even more. But some friends called Fran, widows themselves. They said they knew how hard it was. They said they would pick up Fran for church, and she could sit with them, and afterward join them for lunch. She said, "OK." I saw Fran the following Advent Sunday. She came with her friends and they sat together. After worship I said it was good to see her. She said she was glad she came. She said it was good to know she was not alone.....not alone in her loss.....and not alone in worship.....and not alone in Advent. And I don't know for sure, but I think John might say that in the care of those friends there is something about getting ready for Christmas.

And in all this Advent preparation I am reminded that I have drifted in relationship with one of my brothers. Time, distance, busy lives, a misunderstanding, and some differing values.....it happens. And I can imagine that if I asked John how I might "bear fruit," he might look at me and say; "Swallow the pride, send a card, make a call." That's part of getting ready for Christmas for me. What about you?

Twas a few days before Christmas, and I heard John give a shout.
I thought I knew about Advent, but now I had doubt.
It's not just gifts, cards and lights on a wall,
But it's the big things like caring, sharing and justice for all.
So I let some things go, and talked to my wife,
And now get ready for Christmas, in ways that share life.