

“The Most Woeful Time of the Year”

Luke 3:7-18

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Advent is one of my favorite times of the year. It’s probably the most enjoyable time if you have kids. Advent calendars of all types abound. There’s chocolate ones, and wooden ones, and I hear someone has even invented a whiskey one, which, if your wondering what to get me for Christmas, well, now you know. Its such a festive time of year.

But, interestingly enough, the lectionary readings around this time are not as touchy feely as one might want. Reading through the appointed readings and you don’t get too much baby Jesus and shepherds and wise men. Instead you get these rather difficult passages. Some of them, have an apocalyptic tone to them. One’s that tell us that there are two in a field and one will be taken. One that tells us that Jesus will come like a thief in the night. And one’s like todays gospel reading, from Luke’s third chapter that have John the Baptist telling us that an ax waits at the bottom of every tree.

Well thanks a lot John. Way to rain on the parade. Way to have us not get too excited about this Christmas season. Something’s making me feel like John the Baptist was secretly a Scottish Presbyterian. Because I think it’s safe to say, no one wants to be lectured this close to Christmas, least of all by John.

But maybe Johns got a point. Maybe we need to take a step back and take inventory of exactly what this advent season is meant to be. Perhaps it’s a good thing that as we celebrate the coming of the humble king Jesus, we humble ourselves by taking a nice long look at what we do this advent season.

It occurs to me that in this passage two really important themes are pitted right next to each other. And those two things are both important theological categories and like any good preacher they both start with E, so that you can remember them when you leave church today. And they are: Ethics and Eschatology.

The first we will be most familiar with. Ethics is simply what we as Christians should do. How we might act. The second, eschatology, has to do with last things, about the final destination of everything that exists. And this passage,

and the Advent season invites us to marry these two ominous ideas together in the tiny baby of Jesus.

Jesus, it turns out is God in the flesh, and God has deemed to make his presence known amongst us, not as a king on a throne, but rather as a baby in a dirty manger. This act, the birth of Jesus, is known as the incarnation. And in the incarnation we have the very purpose of all things revealed to us in Jesus. Indeed, Jesus is a king, but he's the king of an upside down kingdom. It's a kingdom where the last will be first, where those who want to be great will be servants, where the poor are richer than the wealthy, and where the word "enough" will rule the day. That is, in God's kingdom, there's room for you and me, and all of our neighbors, and everyone will have enough.

So it makes some sense that the lectionary should have us reading these passages which can only be described as apocalyptic because, in actual fact, the birth of Jesus is a "this changes everything moment". And so, eschatology, the end of the world as we know it, the logic of the way things should be, is radically subverted in Jesus' birth. A whole new way to be alive is revealed in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Advent is a time when we meditate on that. It's the church's new year, because a new messiah, has come to show us what it means to be a new or renewed human being.

Which brings us to ethics. John the Baptist slash Presbyterian is at no loss for words when it comes to ethics. Jesus is coming and we'd better get ready. Its quite a difficult passage to gloss over really. Its difficult because its full of really direct and confrontational ethical commands.

These ethical standards are a hard word to all of us because everyone is included. For not only is the kingdom of God a place where we all get enough, but its also a place where God gets to tell us off a bit. God gets to say enough to our greed, our laziness, our apathy.

And isn't it interesting that John here addresses three very distinct audiences. The crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers. Unlike other places we don't see this request for repentance given only to insiders. However, it is a call to insiders as much as it is to anyone else.

How easy is for us who come to church and live good moral lives to cast our eyes to all of those sinners out there? How easy has it become for us to rest on our laurels? To such resting John would say "repent". Do not assume that

because you sit under the shade of the tree of God you have no responsibility to bear fruit yourself.

As one wise person once said, do not confuse grace which is a gift unearned, with a lack of effort which is a gift squandered.

Insiders (crowds), tax collectors, and soldiers. Tax collectors need to turn around as well. For in the kingdom of God there are no unjust economic systems, no ridiculous interest rates, no pensions squandered. Remember there is enough.

And this is to say nothing of the soldiers. Which in Luke's gospel are a code word for gentiles, outsiders. People from another land. But also a people who participate and rely on a culture of force and violence. And to these people John says "repent". In God's kingdom the lion lays down with the lamb. Violence is both uncalled for and unnecessary. For God's kingdom is a kingdom of self-sacrificing love.

And so what do we make of all of these exhortations? What relevance do they have to our lives in this advent season?

Well, for starters, perhaps we need this passage to act like a bit of a mirror to us. Perhaps we need to let this judgment hit us square in the face. As we prepare for the coming of the prince of peace, perhaps we need to come to grips with the fact that there's a little Pharisee, a little tax collector, a little roman soldier in us all.

Perhaps the call of advent in light of this passage is to think about the ways we all can so easily become so comfortably insider-oriented. Perhaps we need to reckon with the ways in which we participate in a broken economic system. Perhaps we need to front up to the ways in which we are implicated in a social system that relies on exploitation and violence. Why do we need to do this? Because God still wants us to repent, to turn around and head in the direction of the kingdom of God.

And that's the good news of this passage. It's also the good news of Advent and Christmas. We can turn around, God's wants us to, and the spirit will empower us to. What comes after the repentance? Well, perhaps we should take our cue from the way John answers the questions of those who gather to hear these exhortations.

That of course requires us to first ask, *what should we do?* Notice, not what should we believe. Not what should we read? Not, what should we pray about? No, what should we do? So this is about action. Which is different from works. But in the end, what can we say, it turns out that John may not only be a secret Presbyterian, but there's strong evidence to believe that, like Jesus, he's also a lousy protestant.

John's exhortation, his call, is for us to be a tree, so that we can bear fruit. And how interesting that the way we bear fruit is by 1. Sharing (v.11), 2. By caring for persons in your charge (v.13), by acting with equity and justice (v.14), and finally by abiding in the true vine.

Advent is more than a religious season, or festival. Advent, like Christmas, and Easter, is meant to be a conspiracy. This conspiracy is premised on the reality of God being revealed (apoclypsed) in Jesus. So to conspire with Jesus is not simply to act differently and do funny things like have count-down advent calendars. Instead, it's a time where we try to be as much as we believe in accordance with the kingdom of God reveled in Jesus. SO we do silly foolish things. Like commit to buy less and give more. We commit to sow seeds of love and exclusion. We commit to seeing ourselves as the first place that coming of Jesus needs to fix if he is to advent again.

So come, lord Jesus, bring with you your winnowing fork, ready to sort the wheat of our lives from the chaff. Come, Lord of abundance, and say "enough" to our consumption, enough to our apathy, enough to our trying to fill the whole in our heart with stuff. We say come Lord Jesus, bring with you your redeeming fire and burn away our grief, and our unbelief, and our doubt, and our depression, and our loneliness, and our self-doubt, and our self-harming, and our body image issues, and our fear. Come, Maranatha, Lord Jesus, we are ready to be your people, if only you will be our God.

Advent, 2015.