

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Sermon Title: "A Less Selfish Advent and Christmas" (Second Sunday of Advent)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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{SLIDE 1} Most of the time, we gloss over John the Baptist. We don't think much about him. We basically know him to be a prophet who lived in a wilderness. He was the voice crying out, preparing the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah puts it. We might remember that he wore camel-hair coat, which would be a rough and itchy thing to wear in hot weather. He ate locusts and wild honey, which is definitely lower in cholesterol and calories than the fast food we desire to eat. The locusts themselves are considered a delicacy in many African, Middle Eastern and Asian countries, and the protein they pack is denser than the protein we can get from steaks and hamburgers.¹ The last thing we might remember about John the Baptist is that he is the older cousin to Jesus by about six months.²

John the Baptist acts like a fanatic, or we may think he acts like one. He dresses like a fanatic, he eats like a fanatic, he even seems to shout like a

¹ <http://www.livestrong.com/article/549444-the-nutritional-value-of-locusts/>.

² Cf. Luke 1:26-27, 36-37.

fanatic.

{SLIDE 2} And at whom does he shout? Funny enough, not at those who are perceived to be sinners: tax collectors, prostitutes, pagan worshippers. No, John the Baptist goes after the religious order, the Sadducees and Pharisees. “You brood of vipers!” he calls out. “Who warned you of the things to come, so that you might flee God’s wrath?” Why is John the Baptist going after the religious types? The Pharisees spend most of their time reading the Scriptures in order to live the perfect life that God wants them to live. The Sadducees also spend time with Scripture, and they make up a sizable portion of the priests that serve at the temple. These are not perceived sinners, are they? Many people would look to them as good guys, people who seem to have it all together, people whom you want to copy in order to live as God wants you to live. What have they done wrong to deserve the Baptist wrath?

{SLIDE 3} John lays it on the table: “Bear fruit worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’.” John gets right to the point. What sort of believers ought we to be: believers who work at our faith every day? Or, are we believers who assume that we’ve already

worked on our faith, so nothing else needs to be done?

The Pharisees and Sadducees assume they've already got it in the bag. Their salvation is assured, because they are children of Abraham. They are Jews who are promised a new land and a new life, so they don't have to do anything. God is already pleased with them, the Pharisees and Sadducees think, because of how they live. Such proper, such clean, such holy lives that they have already organized for themselves: God must be impressed.

John the Baptist throws that idea right out the window. The path of salvation is a journey – it always has been. It is not a conveyor belt that we ride to heaven, but a solid, stationary path that we must walk with God at our side. Faith is a journey, an expedition, a trek. John the Baptist calls this journey “bearing fruit worthy of repentance.” The key is repentance, which is always a series of checks and balances, a constant adjusting of the thermostat, a daily taking our temperature to see where we stand with God. Sin is always going to influence us. Sin will find a way to separate us from God and others. This is why we must always be on guard, bringing confession to God, rededicating our lives to his kingdom every day. The journey never stops. We never stop growing.

{SLIDE 4} Now, let us take what John the Baptist said to the religious order and stick it in the middle of our Advent season. What sort of believers ought we to be during this festive season? Do we tend to look at the way people go all out, decorating every square foot of their yards with inflatables and lights, and do we make judgement calls on them, saying they are not properly celebrating the season? “It’s too commercial,” we may think. “It’s too over-the-top and ungodly.” Do we see images of Santa Claus and feel the need to attack with the words, “Jesus is the reason for the season”? When we hear a person tells us, “Happy Holidays!” or “Season’s Greetings!” do we respond with “Merry Christmas!” with a bit of arrogance dripping from our words?

{SLIDE 5} We have our traditions, some more religious than others. We have those things that frustrate us about Advent and Christmas with it being too commercial and department-store oriented. Don’t forget that even Lucy Van Pelt in the 1965 special, “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” believed that the holiday had become a big commercial racket with aluminum Christmas trees and cheap toys.

{SLIDE 6} We cannot act like the Pharisees and Sadducees during Advent as though we are bunch of know-it-alls. We do not have this season figured out.

We never do. So even now we are in need of repentance. We need to take a good look at ourselves and realize that we are broken and weak just like everyone else.

Faith is a journey, an expedition, a trek. Advent is a small part of that journey, in which we prepare our hearts for the arrival of our Savior. We constantly adjust of the thermostat of our faith, and make sure that we are ready when Christ approaches. Sin is always going to influence us: throw in a little frustration, throwing in a little arrogance and snippiness. Even during Advent we bring ourselves to God and confess our sin. We admit that we do not celebrate Advent as perfectly as we think. We are not always mindful of Jesus born to us in Bethlehem. We do not also carry a heart of charity within that governs our thoughts, words, and actions. So we confess. We rededicate our lives to God's kingdom. We start the journey toward Christmas again with Christ clearing our minds and opening our eyes to his Advent, his arrival.

{SLIDE 7} As John the Baptist leans in on the religious order, he says that the axe is laid at the roots of the tree, and that axe will fall heavily on the tree if it doesn't bear good fruit. Tree bearing no good fruit are

discarded into the fire. Since we don't want to be like those kinds of tree, what then does it look like to bear good fruit? What does bearing good fruit look like during this Advent season?

{SLIDE 8} One of the big problems that the Pharisees and Sadducees had was thinking too highly of themselves. As much as they came off as being good, religious people, everything they did was about themselves: how they could benefit themselves. For the Pharisees it was perfect understand of the Bible, which they thought would earn them a perfect place in heaven. For the Sadducees it was being one of the 1 percenters, being the richest they could be and separating themselves from the riffraff. The Sadducees also loved to gain important religious positions such as priests of the temple. The Pharisees liked to hold positions of dominance as well, but the Sadducees believed true power came in controlling the temple of God. Everything both groups did was about themselves: how they could look good, how they can seem perfect.

C. S. Lewis said that "humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less." This is what the Pharisees and Sadducees couldn't do, and that is why John the Baptist excoriated them like he did. We don't have to be like bad trees bearing bad fruit. We

do not have to follow the example of the Pharisees and Sadducees on our Advent journey toward Christmas. We think of ourselves less, which means we think of others more. We think less of what we could get for Christmas – we can all get so selfish about getting everything we want on our lists. We think less of what we have to purchase from the stores to make people happy for our own peace – we do not give out of obligation but out of compassion. We think less of trying to make the house or front yard look so perfect for everyone to admire. We think less about getting Christmas Eve or Christmas night dinner absolutely perfect, so everybody thinks we are the perfect houseguests. We think less about throwing it in people's faces that it is Christmas not a Happy Holiday.

We think more of others during this time, and at all times. We think of how we may serve another person with our charity. What can we do for him or her to make life a little easier? What can we give in order to show that we love her or him? Thinking of ourselves less is an attitude that turns into a practice. The more we practice it, the easier it comes to us, the more we realize that service to others is more important than our selfish desires.

{SLIDE 9} Even the Christmas movies and specials

preach this message of thinking of ourselves less. Every one of them promotes the spreading of Christmas cheer during this time of year. They tell us that we must be happier, jollier... there is a “spirit in the air” that just seems to make us more charitable. All the secular Christmas shows are preaching the message the Pharisees and Sadducees didn’t get, and the secular shows have no clue why there is more generosity during the Advent season. What is the real cause of all this “Christmas spirit”?

{SLIDE 10} We know. We think of ourselves less because God thought of himself less. God thought of us and our miserably sinful condition, and came to earth to dwell among us as a human being. He did not regard being equal to God as something to be exploited, “but Christ emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, being born in human likeness, and he humbled himself.”³ This is why we are jollier during this time of year. This is why the lights seem brighter, and the dark clouds that cover our thoughts seem less thick. God came to be with us. God came to show us how to live the life that God dreamed for us since the beginning. He became our Servant, our Healer, our Salvation. He did it all out of great humility and great compassion.

³ Colossians 1:5-8.

John the Baptist was trying to tell the religious order, “Think of yourselves less. It is too easy to get selfish.” For us during Advent it is too easy to become selfish about how Christmas ought to be. Think of ourselves less. Think of others more.

{SLIDE 11} “One is coming who is more powerful than I,” John the Baptist says. “I baptize with water, but he is the One who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”⁴

Last week we discussed preparing the way of the Lord. It isn’t just the job of John the Baptist to prepare the way. It is our duty as well during this Advent season. Comfort is coming. Be ready for Comfort when Comfort arrives.

Such Comfort is not ours alone. We cannot selfishly grasp it for our own. As we prepare the way of the Lord, we look to others and help them prepare the way, as well. We come beside them with open hearts and welcoming minds, and we do what we can to open all our hearts and minds to Christ. As our Advent devotional said one day last week, we look beyond ourselves to see the forgotten in this world.⁵ We witness the lonely, the homeless, the dejected, the frustrated. We think of ourselves less, and offer

⁴ Matthew 3:11, rearranged a little.

⁵ Danielle Bean, *From Heaven to Manger: Family Prayers and Activities for Advent*, Week 1, Day 3.

kindness in some fashion. We offer charity, compassion, comfort: whatever is needed at the moment. We offer them Jesus Christ, who is the One great than us who is arriving. Thinking of ourselves less is an attitude that turns into a practice. The more we practice it, the easier it comes to us, the more we realize that service to others is more important than our selfish desires. The more we also realize that this season can be happier, jollier, more festive, and more complete for us all.

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news: The Christ Child is coming. There is no stopping him. There is no diverting his way. His arrival is inevitable. He is coming to our hearts. And he brings with him light for our darkness. He is able to fill our brokenness and make us whole. He is able to forgive our sins, and offer us life eternal. Thanks be to God, amen.