



December 24, 2006  
Advent 4

Luke 3:7-18

**Prepare the Way of the Lord**

4. *Christmas Surprises*

M. Craig Barnes

I am aware that tonight is Christmas Eve, that many of you are here visiting family and friends, that we are at the beginning of a wonderful holiday, and that there are few things about which we are more sentimental than Christmas. All of that makes this text seem out of place this morning.

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None of us came to church expecting to hear John the Baptist scream, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come? Beware of the coming winnowing fork and unquenchable fire." And just to drive us really nuts, the gospel writer Luke concludes our text by saying, "With many other exhortations, John the Baptist proclaimed good news to the people." Good news? It's not exactly "Jingle Bells." How is this good news? That is exactly the question your preacher has been asking himself all week. It doesn't sound like good news. It sounds like judgment.

Christmas was not meant to be a judgment. But as a pastor I have discovered it often is, especially when we get too sentimental about it.

The aspirations for Christmas are sky high. This is supposed to be a season of hope, peace, joy, and love. Those incredible expectations leave you with two choices. The first is to try to create a holiday where you bracket out the severity of life for a few days with the people you love and the beautifully decorated home and the perfectly appointed tables. Loaded with four weeks of preparation and irresistible resolve, you determine, "We *will* have a fabulous holiday." The other choice is to do just the opposite by opting out of the whole celebration. Those who make this choice think the whole holiday is a farce for them. "I can't rise to the aspirations of this day," they lament, "and I will not put a little tinsel on my broken heart. It just makes a mockery of reality." So they just try to survive Christmas. In either case, by its exceptional nature, Christmas is a judgment upon the rest of our lives. Even if you can pull off a beautiful holiday, it won't be long before a little reality starts to poke through the festivity.

Over the years I have become an aficionado of children's Christmas pageants. You have all seen them. The star is always Mary who looks down into the manger at her child with all of the serenity that she has learned to imitate from the story. Joseph is usually a lanky boy hovering over his wife and child and looking as awkward as the original Joseph must have been. There are always a few shepherds scattered around dressed in burlap, and sometimes they drag around a child dressed up as a sheep. Of course, the wise men have the nicest outfits. The character role usually

goes to Herod who is supposed to look just despicable. I imagine this kid spending time in the bathroom mirror practicing his sneer. My favorite role in the pageant is the angels. They typically serve as the chorus who sing so beautifully while their wings flap against each other. But the reason I love the angels so much is that since the costumers never have time to worry about footwear, beneath their angelic appearance you can usually find a pair of sneakers sticking out. There they stand in front of the congregation with halos at the top and black sneakers at the bottom. “Ah, there it is,” I think. “That’s Christmas for us.”

For a few days we are all angels wearing sneakers. Not real angels. We’re just average people dressing up for the holidays with the truth sticking out. But we know a time will soon come when the holiday is over, and we have to take off the halos and get back to the workplaces where there is little hope, peace, joy, and love.

Is that all Christmas is - just a fancy pageant that lasts a few days in our homes and churches? If so, then the judgment it makes about the rest of life is severe. We might as well hear John the Baptist interrupt our drama to say, “You brood of vipers, who told you to flee the wrath to come when you go back to work by dressing up in matching sweaters with reindeers on them?” Christmas was never meant to be a holiday. It was meant to change our lives. That is why no Christmas is complete without inviting John the Baptist into the festivities.

The opening chapters of Luke’s gospel interweave the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus so tightly as to make them inseparable. First, we’re told the surprising announcement of John’s birth to his parents for whom it was too late to have a son. Then we’re told the surprising announcement of Jesus’ birth to his parents for whom it was too soon to have a son. Next, Luke describes how Elizabeth the mother of John and Mary the mother of Jesus come together to discover that these interruptions are of God. Mary then sings her song of praise. After that, Zechariah the father of John sings his song of praise when his son is born. Then we are told about the birth and childhood of Jesus, and immediately afterwards the gospel returns to telling us about John the Baptist. Luke doesn’t want you to miss the point that these two men are a part of the same gospel story. The story doesn’t alternate between Jesus and John as good news and bad news as if they are playing good cop, bad cop. No, they make a single Christmas message – real change in real life is really possible!

After John finished preaching his dire sermon, the people who heard it began to ask him, “So what should we do?” What is most striking about John’s response to their question is how simple it all seems. “If you have two coats, give one to the person who has none. And if you have enough food, give to those who are hungry. Collect no more than you are due. Do not make threats. Do not lie. Be satisfied with your wages.” There was nothing new in this. It was as if John had said to us, “‘What should we do?’ is not a real question. You know what you should do. Live charitably, ethically, justly. The real question is, ‘How will you do that?’” Maybe we can be giving and loving over the Christmas holidays, but how do we do that for the rest of the year?

We all live with so much fear that no matter how much we have, it will not be enough. This fear is responsible for the difficulty we have giving to those around us in need. It is not that we are mean or self-indulgent. We are simply afraid that we are too limited in love, wisdom,

health, and, of course, money to care adequately. This fear blinds us to the needs of the poor, and it makes it impossible even to care adequately for those we love the most. We want to offer our parents, children, and friends what they most need to receive, but we are terrified that the giving will cost more than we can give. That is why we fret so much over boundaries and limitations. At Christmas, we can put on the sweater and try to blend in, but after the holidays, we soon go back to our anxieties about what these relationships cost us. The truth of the matter is that caring for others and doing what John tells us will cost more than we have to give. We really don't have it in us. That's the judgment part of Christmas, but remember that John is not just the bad cop. He came to prepare the way for Jesus, which has always been the purpose of judgment.

Jesus wasn't born to give you a holiday from John's judgment. He was born to make every day a holy day in which you fulfill John's exhortation. He does within you, what you can't do without him.

The poet John Keats wrote about the necessity of coming to terms with your "negative capability." Your negative capability is your ability to stay in the place where you are inadequate. It is the place where you most acutely feel your limitations, anxieties, doubts, and fears. Thus, it is the place from which you are most tempted to flee. But this is also the place where you are best able to receive the birth of a Savior. Whenever you confess inadequacy or inability, you prepare room for the Christ Child to be born within you. This is the ministry of the Holy Spirit who incarnates Christ not only in Bethlehem but also in the life of all who receive the Savior.

As with any newborn, the hope starts small and fragile. If you hear the real message of Christmas this year, you may leave your holiday unsure if it will really make a difference in your life. But today we do not hear all of the gospel story. The child will grow, and soon you will find that he is strong within you. In time, you may even echo the Apostle Paul who claimed, "It is not I who live, but Christ who lives within me." And that is why Jesus, and Christmas, and even John the Baptist are all such good news.

*Benediction: I hope you have a very Merry Christmas, not because it is unreal but because there is nothing more real than Christ's gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love that are all born within you. Amen.*