

## What Shall We Do?

Luke 3:1-14

We spend a lot of time this time of year getting ready. Families get ready for Christmas, cleaning house, making food, hanging decorations, baking cookies, wrapping presents. Students get ready for finals, Dead Week, projects, papers, and presentations by making flashcards, taking practice exams, and meeting in study groups. Homeowners and car owners get ready for winter, and cities get ready for snow fall. Musicians get ready for a plethora of concerts, special services, and other events. Everyone is getting ready.

But often, when we are getting ready, we reach the point where we don't quite know what to do next. The first year in a new house, you have to figure out how to prepare for the challenges winter brings. The first year of concerts or dance recitals, you have to learn how to get ready for the performance, or how to go watch the performance. Students have to figure out the unique quirks of how their professor or TA grades.

And so there's a lot of time spent asking, either yourself or others, "What should I do?" This year, there are extra questions. Concerns about the newest COVID variant have many asking, "what should I do?" The answer seems to be the same as it has been; get vaccinated if you haven't yet done so, get a booster if eligible, wear a mask, wash your hands, stay home if you're sick, and wait to see how bad it is. Supply chain concerns and inflation concerns have people wondering what to do. The answer is buy local, shop early, and remember Christmas isn't about stuff, but about a Savior.

In the church, we spend time getting ready, too. Advent means coming and it is a season of

preparation. We take time out in the church year to prepare for the coming of Christ. And at first glance it seems like all of those other preparations we do this time of year. We add a few extra church services in. Wreathes and garlands are put up, the paraments are all changed to blue. The trees are up. But that's not all we do to get ready.

In the church, we prepare to meet Jesus. And the way the church has done this for centuries is by having you meet John. John the Baptist, or John the Baptizer. A voice on the edge of the wilderness. Every gospel writer includes John and every time John appears he points you to Jesus. He gathers Old Testament prophecies and visions of the future and holds them together in a way that leads you to your Lord. As John points us to Jesus, though, he does so in a way that makes us uncomfortable.

When we come to church, we want to be comfortable. We don't just want to make sure that the sanctuary is warm in winter and cool in the summer. We want to hear that Jesus loves me. We want to hear that God is love. We want to hear that everything will turn out ok in the end. We want to hear that God will make us happy, and fix our problems. We want to do so in a familiar way. We want to sing familiar hymns, follow a familiar liturgy, and finish in an hour. We want to be comfortable.

John doesn't prepare us to be comfortable. Instead, like the prophets before him, he makes us uncomfortable. Not just because he comes eating locusts and wild honey, wearing a camel hair robe. He makes us uncomfortable because he holds up a mirror, and shows us all of our blemishes. He shows us our sins, our failures to

love God and our neighbors. He shows us our hypocrisy. He preaches an uncomfortable word to get through to sinful, stubborn hearts and get us to turn back towards God.

As he challenged his hearers, as he echoed the messages of the prophets before him, people flocked to John and his message of repentance. His “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The message of repentance that John preaches is a message of a new life, a new direction. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means to turn around. John is preaching a new direction for these people’s lives, giving them a complete 180 degree turn.

In Luke’s Gospel, this is the first time we hear about the concept of repentance. Having heard him proclaim a baptism of repentance, the crowds ask, “What then should we do?” This is followed by similar, more specific questions from toll-collectors and soldiers. John’s answers – give your extra clothing and food to those in need, etc. – help them define and understand “repentance” in terms of everyday life. What John instead suggests is fairly simple, even mundane. He tells the crowds to share He tells the soldiers, who were more like hired mercenaries than organized as we think of, not to bully and extort from those under their protection. He tells the tax collectors to not collect more than they were required to, to stop following the widespread practice of the time of charging more than required and skimming off the top to fund their lavish lifestyles.

We see that repentance from a tax collector in action in the story of Zacchaeus, the wee little man that the children like to sing about. When he meets Jesus, he shows his repentance by giving half of his possessions to the poor, and

paying those he cheated four times what he owed them. His life was dramatically turned around from encountering Jesus.

On the surface, it seems that repentance is an act of turning away from self toward a life of neighborly care. Yet, the substance of repentance is certainly not good works. Repentance is a turning to God for mercy and acceptance. It is something the sinner does in search of salvation. Repentance is the cry: "Lord have mercy on me a sinner." Only then, having received God's mercy, can we respond by showing mercy.

So like the crowds went out from Jerusalem, we go out to the wilderness to hear from John, to hear his message for us to change our lives, to turn them around, to repent. Like the crowds, we wonder what we should do. In response, we hear the concrete ways that our lives are to change. We hear the opportunities we have to do the work God calls us to do, in small ways of caring and bringing hope to those around us. Maybe you can take your extra clothes to Overflow or the Salvation Army or Goodwill. Maybe you can volunteer at Food at First, or participate in a food drive. We see how the work of our everyday lives is changed, as they are reshaped around God’s priorities. We see how God’s kingdom has come and is coming among us and in the world. We are called to do the kingdom’s work, without establishing a new kingdom.

But what do we do while we wait for the Lord? We are to be busy living lives of repentance, lives holy and pleasing to God. This doesn’t just mean to follow the advice of one of my favorite bumper stickers: “Jesus is coming: Look busy.” It means to be doing what God has placed before you to do. If you’re doing things

you shouldn't, stop! If you're not doing things you should, get started! If you're already keeping God's commands to the best of your ability, thanks be to God—keep it up! Be busy doing good works—and repent and receive the forgiveness Jesus earned for us on the cross when you fall short.

What shall we do? Love our neighbors. Care for those in need. Live out our vocations in service to others. Turn our lives around, to follow the one who turns all of our lives around. It's not easy, but it's simple.

And as we do, we wait. The promise of Advent, the season we're in now as we prepare for Christmas, is that the same Jesus who came down at Christmas, as a baby in Bethlehem, the one who we are clothed with at baptism, the one who comes to us in bread and wine, body and blood is the same one who will come down again to disperse the gloomy clouds of night and put death's dark shadow to flight once and for all.

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