

YOU BETTER WATCH OUT, I'M TELLIN' YOU WHY

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas now that the tree is up in Rockefeller Center. Fifth Avenue in the 50's is ablaze with lights. It may be a recessed economy, but the city has put on a happy face for the season as once again we host people from all around the nation and all around the world, if they can afford to come.

The bad news of bonuses depleted and jobs lost is made a twist more palatable in these days because in spite of the realities on the ground, our eyes are still straining to locate stars in this Advent season; more than just the alignment of Mars and Venus and the Moon in the sky, we still hope that there is yet one star, brightly shining in the night, that may lead us at the end of these days all the way to Bethlehem.

So the task of Advent is to stay awake, be ready, be watchful and waiting for the one who is coming who will be the Prince of Peace and the Light that will shine in the darkness, a Light the darkness has never put out.

It's John the Baptist that walks onto the stage on this second Sunday of Advent. A man of the wilderness who proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He cuts a strange figure by modern standards, and we probably picture him somewhat like the Caveman in the Geico Insurance ads, the one who has no luck with the girls, whose hairy arms and facial fur and deep set eyes would push anyone away.

Leather belt, Mark says, and camel's hair clothing; he ate a diet of locusts and wild honey, the kind of food you might find offered by some street vendor in Beijing, but not very appetizing to most Western palates.

Strange as John sounds descriptively, in so many words Mark is telling us that John has taken up the ascetic life, that there is urgency about the hour and the day, and that he is a prophet in the tradition of Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah; strange in appearance but bent on a purpose which is to be the herald of One who will come after him, the thong of whose sandals he is not worthy to untie. "I have baptized you with water," John proclaimed, "but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Boo-yah!

Is it any wonder that John could command a crowd? Even more than his ascetic life, his strange appetite, and his off-beat haberdashery he bore a message of hope shrouded in the cloak of repentance and preparation.

It is not an uncommon pairing. We've heard it before. That familiar song of the Christmas season, "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," makes a comparative promise about the future that calls for a response of corrective preparation. The technical terms for this tick-tock of theological readiness are eschatology and ethics, the conviction that in order to be ready for the future when it comes, one has to make appropriate behavioral preparation now. Thus the warning, "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better watch out, I'm tellin' you why, Santa Claus Is Comin' to Town. He's making a list, he's checking it twice, he's gonna find out who's naughty and nice. Santa Claus is coming to town."

Of course I have always thought that the judgment involved in this song, that all important list, makes Santa sound a little like a cross between the Candy Man and Charles Manson. This is the guy who sneaks into your house when you're sleeping and withholds the goodies if you're bad. A strange and retributive figure. No wonder so many children cry at the Tartan Fair or in the line at Macy's when they are taken for a picture on Santa's lap. It's enough to make anybody a little nervous.

Despite popular opinion to the contrary, our Christian faith doesn't promise Santa Claus at the end of these Advent days but another One altogether; in fact John the Baptist's message describing him has nothing to do with the secular festivities, the jingle and joy and jolly stuff we hear coming across the Muzak in every department store elevator. Our Advent expectations promise no brightly wrapped packages nor does it require any shopping sprees or journeys to find just the right gift for just about everyone. Instead our Advent expectation strikes a more sober chord than that, because it offers a response to a deeper need than anything a new tie or some spicy cologne can supply. It promises the coming of one so holy and so worthy that John the Baptist himself felt that it would not be seemly for him to kneel down and untie the thong of this man's sandals.

John points us to a *messiah*, a long awaited figure in Jewish expectation. From the days of Jeremiah and Ezekiel 600 years before Jesus' birth, Israel began its long wait for the arrival of this One who would be part warrior, part prophet, part king, literally "an anointed one" who would follow in the footsteps of David, the greatest of all Israel's kings; One who would deliver Israel from its long history of living in the breach between great military and political powers, nestled geographically on the way to the great kingdoms and empires of history; Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Phoenicia, Greece, and finally Rome. One by one over countless centuries, they marched across Israel on their way to greater battles and larger conquests. Israel stood in the way, an incidental victim, and still does, stand in the way from its enemies' perspective.

The Egyptians made them slaves. The Babylonians took them into exile. The Assyrians came and took them away. The Greeks influenced them. The Romans occupied them. And every time, as one after another of their enemies defeated or displaced them Israel cried out for that time when the messiah might come. When the wrongs they suffered would be made right.

When would he come? And what would happen when he did? And how would they know him at his arriving?

The mother of the child whose firstborn was slain in the reign of Herod, whose shock at the terror of a blade severing her child's body cried in the night and was haunted by the loss as she raged at heaven. She held onto the hope that when the messiah comes, there will be justice at last.

The father whose daughter was raped by a Babylonian soldier pillaging her village, cries at his daughter's suffering and holds onto the belief that when the messiah comes, that wrong will be made right.

The husband who sees his wife fall sick, who watches as she languishes with an illness that cannot be treated, takes comfort in the thought that when the messiah comes

the lame will dance, and the sick will be made whole, and the child will play in safety over the adder's den.

When the Messiah comes, they said, there will be no more poverty, no begging in the streets, no need of shelters for the homeless to make it through the night, no enemies constantly threatening terror in the streets, because when the messiah comes there will be justice and peace and every tear will be wiped away.

For centuries, Israel lived with this expectation. *When the messiah comes. When the messiah comes.*

And we all know what it is to hold out hope for a deliverer, don't we? Someone to come at the last minute to save us from our peril, from our worst fear, from our enemy, from unemployment, from the things that keep us up at night tossing and turning. We long for the cure, the windfall, the present, the rich aunt to leave us a fortune, the doctor who knows what she's doing, the financial advisor who can turn our deficit into our gain. Someone to ride in at the last moment who will save us, like the cavalry in an old Western movie.

Recently I was talking with someone who was telling me about a conversation that she overheard at her child's nursery school. A teacher asked "What's Christmas all about?" and one of the children said, "toys," and another said "games," and another said, "candy," and several said simultaneously, "presents!"

"And who brings all these wonderful presents?" the teacher asked. "Santa Claus," the children said in unison. "Santa Claus," all except one little boy who obviously had been overhearing some adult conversation about who is bringing all the presents this season. And that child said, "Not Santa Claus, Obama. Obama is bringing all the presents."

In this rather austere December, when we have been inundated by bad economic news, hopes are running high for a fresh start as a new President takes office and we all are hoping that he may be able to change the culture of economic despair that has befallen us.

But, no new President, wise or gifted or popular as he may be, gathering strong and wise people about him, can be the messiah, ushering in that day when peace has come and poverty is eradicated, and all who want work have work, and God's commonwealth has arrived. Never have so many hoped so much from so few as this nation standing on the eve of a new administration. Our new President will need our prayers, our support, and our shoulders to the wheel if together we are to make a difference.

But we should not place on him any *messianic* expectations. What God promises to us is the satisfaction of an even deeper need than economic needs. God promises to address the deepest of all our deep needs. The greatest of all our great hopes.

And that is to come to us, and join us in this earthly life of ours, as One who will be for us a Savior in the highest and truest and best sense of all. One who will bring peace on earth, a peace that passes human understanding. One who will put an end to suffering. One who will bring healing in his wings. One in whom our hope shall be justified, and our fear will be overcome.

When that One comes every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low, the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places plain, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.

We are headed into a simpler kind of Christmas this year. Most everybody I know has told the ones they love that they're not shopping this year, or they've warned the kids not to expect too much; only one big present this year. There are a lot of us who are going to make a donation to the heart fund, or the church, or Amfar, or God's Love We Deliver, or to Sloane Kettering, or to the Times' neediest families, and then send a Christmas card to friends saying that that is their gift this year, a kindness done for the sake of strangers in the name of friends.

And maybe we are long overdue for this kind of Christmas, sweeping the excesses and gaudiness of Christmas aside so that we can get back to some basic things, like focusing on the heart of the season, and a story of a God whose love will do anything for us; remembering a poor and simple family who was given the gift of a child long ago; a child who was also a savior, a long expected One who was, himself, the greatest gift ever given. In the face of that gift from God, all our giving has always paled anyway.

Moss Hart, the Broadway playwright and author, tells a touching story of his own experience as a boy going out on the streets of 149th Street and Westchester Avenue in the New York of the late 1910's.

It was a neighborhood of dray wagons, pushcarts, and immigrants in those days. On this particular December evening, Hart went out with his father making their way up the street past the pushcarts. Every now and then they would stop at a cart and Hart would say, "Look at that chemistry set," or "There's a stamp album," or "Look at the printing press!" Each time his father would pause and ask the vendor the price and then without a word they would move on to the next pushcart. Once or twice, his father picked up a toy and held it to see if Moss was interested, but Hart was ten years old and his hopes were set on chemistry sets and printing presses.

Hart says he looked up and realized they were coming to the last two or three carts, when his father looked up as well and he jingled some coins in his pocket.

Hart writes,

In a flash I knew it all. He'd gotten together about seventy five cents to buy me a Christmas present, and he hadn't dared say so in case there was nothing to be had for so small a sum. As I looked up at him I saw a look of despair and disappointment in his eyes that brought me closer to him than I had ever been in my life. I wanted to throw my arms around him and say, "It doesn't matter... I understand... This is better than a chemistry set or a printing press... I love you." But instead we stood shivering beside each other for a moment – then turned away from the last two pushcarts and started silently back home... I didn't even take his hand on the way home nor did he take mine. We were not on that basis. Nor did I ever tell him how close to him I felt that night – that for a little while the concrete wall between father and son had crumbled away and I knew that we were two lonely people struggling to reach each other.¹

When the Messiah comes, the wealth of our soul will be the treasure of our Spirit, not the balance of the dollars in our checkbooks but the abundance of faith in our hearts.

When the Messiah comes, today's values will be turned upside down, and what seems most important will not be; and what we have neglected we will wish we had attended; simple things, you know.

So be alert to the signs and the nearness of the season. If you want to make ready for Christmas this year, don't go to the stores looking for what others most need, for what we all most need cannot be bought in any stores or ordered from any catalogues.

Set right what is wrong. Make whole what is broken. Do deeds of justice and mercy. Answer first what is most needful. Reach your hand across those places where chasms of reluctance lie. Then, when the Messiah comes, and he *will* come as you do these things, you will be ready to greet him at his arriving.

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¹ Moss Hart, **Act One: An Autobiography**, 1959. As quoted in **Creative Brooding** by Robert A. Raines. (New York: Macmillan, 1966) 35-36.