

Sunday, December 5th, 2021
The Second Sunday in Advent
Pastor Tim Huber

What Then Shall We Do?

Way back in 1911, Roald Amundsen, he was a Norwegian, became the very first person to lead a successful expedition to the South Pole. Amundsen also was very famous for his incredible commitment to the way that he prepared for this expedition. In his late twenties, Amundsen traveled all the way to Norway to Spain for a two-month sailing trip in order to earn his masters certificate for being able to be a captain of a ship. This was way back in 1899 and he had nearly a 2000-mile journey just to get there, and he travelled there by bicycle. He also experimented with eating raw dolphin meat. His reasoning was that as an explorer, one day he might get ship-wrecked and be surrounded by dolphins, he might as well know if he could eat one of them. It was also part of Amundsen's years of preparing for his quest, the training his body, and gaining as much practical experience as possible in order to be fully prepared.

Amundsen even apprenticed with Eskimos, learning how to use dog sleds and like Eskimos, learning to never hurry; but move slowly and steadily avoiding excessive sweat that of course could turn in to ice with subzero temperatures. He always wore Eskimo clothing to protect him and yet very loose fitting to help sweat evaporate. Systematically he trained himself for basically every conceivable situation that he might encounter enroute to going to the South Pole. Amundsen's philosophy was: You don't wait until you are already in an unexpected storm to discover what you need for it, or you are already on your Antarctic journey to then become a supreme skier and dog-handler. You prepare all the time, so you are always ready for what is ahead.

Now isn't the same really true for God's people as we prepare for Christ's return? Our appointed gospel lesson for Advent 2 from Luke chapter 3 centers primarily on the words of an Old Testament prophet that you probably don't even think of as an Old Testament prophet. Yet is considered to be the very last of all of them. His name was John the

Baptizer, the so-called preacher of righteousness. He was not afraid to confront the very unrighteous actions and attitudes of the Pharisees, the tax collectors, the Roman soldiers and some other members of the many crowds. The many who came out to the Jordan River area to hear him preach about the coming Messiah and the need to be properly prepared for the advent of his arrival. But how? No, not by eating raw dolphin meat but by this thing baptism, followed up by repentant lives that produced the spiritual fruit that demonstrates true readiness for the advent of the Messiah.

How do we prepare for the advent of our King? Well, obviously by first possessing a faith in that Messiah alone for our salvation and our only way to heaven. But, according to John the Baptizer, some from the crowd returns and in response to these same questions by three separate groups of people, he is asked: "What then shall we do?" John gives three very tangible ways to show that we are prepared. If we have wealth, then we are to share it. If we have a position of trust, then we are to honor it. And if we are in a position of power, we are not to abuse it.

So, this morning, lets consider each of these things in this advent season designed primarily to spiritually prepare us for Christ's arrival. First of all, if we have wealth, God's Spirit will lead us to share it. The crowds asked John, what should we then do? He answered, 'He who has two coats, let him share with him how has none. He who has food, let him do likewise.' Christmas time of course, is a very special time for sharing. Many of us exchange gifts with one another. But many of us far beyond that. We put up Angel Trees, we drop money into the Salvation Army kettles, we distribute food baskets and prepare some of those Samaritan's purse shoe boxes. Some of us make our church treasurer really happy by special above and beyond, end of year donations to the church. There is something about this season that just kind of helps us to see far beyond ourselves to the needs of others. That special something of course, is the knowledge of a God who gave us a gift far more precious than any gift that we could possibly give back to Him or even to one another. And that is the inexpressible gift of His only begotten Son.

Of course, for one reason or another, everybody is not able to give as much as they would like. Like that poor church member who sent his pastor the following letter.

Dear Pastor,

I wish to inform you that the present condition of my bank account, makes it almost impossible to give more to my church. My shattered financial situation is due to federal laws, state laws, county laws, corporation laws, mother-in-laws, brothers-in-laws, and political outlaws. Through these laws I'm compelled to pay a business tax, amusement tax, school tax, gas tax, water tax, light tax, income tax. Even my brain seems quite taxed. I am required to purchase a business license, a dog license, even a marriage license. For my own safety, I'm required to buy life insurance, liability insurance, earthquake insurance, flood insurance, accident insurance, theft insurance, unemployment insurance and fire insurance. Simply because I refuse to donate something or other, I'm boycotted, talked about, lied about, held up and robbed until I'm ruined.

I can tell you honestly, that had not the unexpected happened, I could not enclose this check. God is good. The wolf that so often comes to my door, finally had pups in the kitchen so I sold them and here is the money.

By the way, I believe the church treasurer actually cashed his check as well.

I guess we all feel that way, don't we? Inundated, demands for money from every side. Particularly during this season of the year. And yet, the gift of Christmas is a unique gift, that we keep paying forward in order to really enjoy it. Christ doesn't our hearts without also touching our wallets, as well as our attitudes of those who are in need. Christ comes into our lives bringing unmerited, unconditional love. Our enjoyment of Christmas tends to be proportional to the joy that we bring to others. So, if we have any measure of resources, as most of us actually do, John the baptizer reminds us that from the day of our baptism, it should be second nature for God's people to share it.

Then John's second prescription for preparing for Christ's coming is this. If we are in a position of trust, we are expected to honor it. In our text from Luke 3, we read next that even tax collectors came out to John the Baptist, in order to be baptized. And they also asked, "what then shall we do?" John replied, 'don't collect more than is required of you.' These Jews collected taxes for the occupying Roman government. So, tax collectors were despised as basically enemy collaborators. They were notorious for adding as much as they could possibly get away with in extra fees for whatever they were contracted to collect. Something that was absolutely legal to the Romans but totally unethical to their fellow Jews. They were temple outcasts. In spite of that they became very prosperous. Notice that John doesn't tell them to give up their jobs. After all, it was Saint Paul who would write to the congregation in Rome many years later; 'give taxes to whom taxes are due and revenue to whom revenue is due.' So then John simply reminds them to exercise honesty in their work. They are in a position of trust. 'What then shall we do?' John simply is saying, honor that trust.

Honesty of course, seems to be kind of a disappearing commodity in our land, doesn't it? I remember reading a few years ago about an American woman's experience in Japan. She was standing in line at one of their typically jam-packed subway stations; and noticed a pile of money lying on the counter unattended. Others had also noticed it and she watched with mounting incredulity as each person left it right where it was. Finally, a woman walked over, picked up the bills, but then just took them to somebody else to ask if that person had left them there. When they said, no; she just put the money back. How long do you think that money would have laid unclaimed in a New York subway?

Somewhere in my files is an article written by Christina Sommers about ethics without virtue. In this article she criticizes how ethics is being taught in American university classes. Pointing out that students taking college ethics courses debate abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, cloning, etc. while learning almost nothing about private decency, honesty, personal responsibility, or honor. A colleague of hers didn't like what she had to say and told her that in her classroom, she would continue to focus on the great issues of social justice such as racism, women's rights, corruption by big business and the

transgressions of multi-national corporations in third world nations. This colleague explained, 'you will not have moral citizens without first having a moral government.' She made it very clear that Sommers was wasting her time, even doing harm by promoting bourgeoisie personal virtues and not awaking the social conscience of her students. However at the end of the semester year, that same colleague came into Sommers' office carrying a stack of exams, and looking quite upset. What's wrong? The colleague responded, 'they cheated on their social justice take home final. They plagiarized. More than half of the students in her ethics had copied from secondary sources. What are you going to do?' Asked Sommers. The colleague gave her a self-mocking smile and said, "I'd like to borrow a copy of that article that you wrote on ethics without virtue."

We simply cannot have a society that is not built on honesty and trust. Nor can there exist the oxymoron of untrustworthy believers to whom God has personally entrusted the gift of eternal life and the responsibility to share that gift with others until Christ returns. John was saying that when we are baptized the Holy Spirit washes us clean from the inside out. So as God's redeemed people holding a position of trust; whether its in business, government, church, school or home, honor it. That is the second way John says we can stand prepared for Christ's arrival by living trustworthy lives of honor.

But there is still a third way. If we have power we are not to abuse it. Our text says that soldiers then came to John and asked him, "What then shall we do?" John responded, "rob noone by violence or by false accusations." In other words, don't abuse your power. Power is a frequently used word in our society. In fact, I think its even more important than money. Political parties' campaign for it. Ethnic entities start civil wars over it. Rioters cancel out others in order to get it. It can be abused in governments, work, at home and sadly I have to admit even within God's church. So, when John spoke to these Roman soldiers who ruled occupied Israel with truly an iron hand. He had seen firsthand how abusive so-called Roman justice could be. As soldiers forced Jewish citizens to perform acts of service for Rome that they simply just didn't want to do for themselves. All of us at one time or another, may find ourselves in a position of power. A parent has power over a child, an employer over an employee, a teacher over their student. And so, John

says to each of us; if you have power, don't abuse it. Just as Jesus Himself would say about His ministry. I came to serve, not to be served; in order to give My life as a ransom for the many.

There is no better example of a tragic abuse of power, I think, than king Herod. An exceptionally able ruler who erected palaces, fortresses, aqueducts, even entire cities and of course even the great temple in Jerusalem. He was so highly respected for his accomplishments, that he became known as Herod the great. And yet his life deteriorated into paranoia as he guarded his power for forty long years. Even going so far as to try to murder the male babies of Bethlehem. He was continually writing to Rome for permission from the emperor to execute one or more of his own sons to protect his position. Finally, even his friend Caesar Augustus once admitted, "It is safer to be Herod's pig than his son," which is a pun on two very similar sounding Latin words.

Of course, Herod's power play to eliminate the Christ Child, did not work. And on the day of Christ's return, Herod will join all the rest of the world's power brokers in bowing down before the true King of kings when as the scripture says, "The Son of man returns in the clouds with power and great glory." Sadly, Herod's penchant for abusing his power was inherited by his relatives. So that one of Herod's sons ended up beheading John the Baptizer because John boldly pointed out an adulterous relationship of that particular tyrant and his wife.

Power does something to people and it is not always pretty either. God's advent people, who look forward to Christ's return, have a far different kind of power to exercise. The kind that Saint Paul speaks of in Romans 1:16 where he tells us never to be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ because it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.

So, how do you and I best prepare for Christ's return during this advent season? What then shall we do? John says, "Put your baptism into practice. If you have wealth, then share it. If you are in a position of trust, then honor it. If you have power, do not abuse it." In other words, not just in these three ways, but in every way, let the Holy Spirit

prepare and empower you for Christ's return by becoming more and more like Christ each day.

John's response to the questions of these three groups of people weren't about what we must do in order to be saved; but how God radically changes us once we are saved. John was telling these three groups of people: 'Don't just repent and get baptized merely to escape God's punishment, but rather so that the Holy Spirit can transform the very way that you live your life for the Messiah.' How do we utilize the wealth, the trust, the power that God gives us until our King returns? Not only will that be our indicator of our faith but even more importantly, a wonderful witness of it to others in society who look up to us before the day that they finally and eventually will look up and see Christ Himself return.

In the name of our Advent King, Amen.