

## **“What Would Jesus Give?”**

### **Luke 3:7-18**

*“And the crowds asked [John], ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’” —Luke 3:10-11*

This is the time of year for last-minute gift suggestions. The pitch goes something like this: “Only *X* number of shopping days until Christmas! Here are some great gift suggestions for that special someone. Guaranteed delivery by December 24, if you order today!”

Some of us are last-minute gift-givers and appreciate the helpful reminder. A few of us began our Christmas shopping with post-Christmas sales a year ago. Most of us are somewhere in between. Some men, like me, only buy one gift and are thankful our wives buy the rest.

However, we approach the annual shopping spree, it’s a pretty fair bet that at some point during the Advent season most of us are faced with the question, “What should I give?” It’s a question retailers love to hear because a large portion of their annual revenue arrives in November and December.

The biblical wise men knew what to give: gold, frankincense, and myrrh, which are replicated by those mysterious foil-wrapped parcels held out by bath-robed and cotton-bearded dads in Christmas pageants too numerous to mention. Gold: the sign of royalty. Frankincense: those waxy crystals that, when burned, emit an aroma associated with high church traditions and holiness. Myrrh: a pungent spice, used in ancient times to anoint dead bodies for burial — and in the case of the Christ child, an ominous foreshadowing of things to come.

Did you know the New Testament offers a Christmas gift-giving guide? It comes from a man most would consider an unusual candidate for personal shopping consultant: John the Baptist.

Old John doesn't much resemble the picture that comes to mind when we hear the words, "personal shopper." He doesn't favor the elegant duds of Fifth Avenue or Rodeo Drive (or whatever high-fashion boutiques there may have been in Old Jerusalem). Luke's gospel doesn't tell us what he looked like, but Matthew and Mark do. They say John wore "clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist" (Matthew 3:4).

Camel hair clothing is actually a thing. You can find high-end sport jackets and overcoats that are woven of the stuff — but John's garb was much less elegant. As for that leather belt wound around his waist, let's just say it wasn't Gucci.

In describing John in this way, Matthew and Mark are building a parallel between him and the great prophet Elijah — who, likewise, worked from an office located out behind a clump of sagebrush. 1 Kings 1:8 describes Elijah as "a hairy man, with a leather belt round his waist." Notice the similarity of language. It's no accident. Elijah was a preacher and miracle-worker of such power and eloquence that even King Ahab trembled at the mention of his name.

Matthew and Mark point out that when John went out to rustle up some grub, he didn't exactly stop by the food court for a Mitchel's Ice Cream. His snack of choice was locusts and wild honey.

John lived off the land: free and independent, beholden to no one, a prince of the open road. He was, in short, his own boss, at least as far as human beings were concerned.

When it came to God, on the other hand, John was passionately devoted. It was obedience to the divine call that led him out into the wilderness in the first place. It's this same devotion to God that kept him preaching a harsh and demanding call to repentance, even at the risk of his own life.

John's message, of course, isn't exactly feel-good religion: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" With an inspirational message like that, you'd think John wouldn't have any followers left — although, in truth, it's quite the opposite. The crowds just keep coming. They scramble down the muddy riverbank, wade out into the water and cross their hands reverently before their chests, before this shaggy-haired wild man almost drowns them.

John offers one thing no one else in the religion business seems to offer: *truth*. Folks will come a long way and put up with all sorts of hardships — even getting dunked in muddy river-water — if by so doing they'll encounter the truth.

"What then should we do?" ask the people, after hearing John's prophecy of doom. Here's where John's gift-giving advice comes in: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (Luke 3:11).

If you have two coats hanging in your closet, give one away. That's a 50% charitable giving standard, for the mathematically inclined — a quintuple tithe! If you're sitting down at the taco place with a couple of burritos and you see a homeless man with his nose pressed up against the window, then you know what to do: give half your lunch away!

Notice that John isn't talking about the sort of giving that occupies most of our attention in these days leading up to Christmas.

The names on our shopping lists mostly belong to people close to us, people we know and love. Where's the name of the person who lives in a tent in the woods behind the gas station? Or the skin-and-bones mother in a refugee camp in some war-torn country like Afghanistan?

Not only that, it's more than just a matter of writing an end-of-the-year check to the church, or some well-publicized charity. Giving money is a great thing, but when it comes to a subject like justice, it's not the whole story.

Some tax collectors come up to John and ask, "What should we do?"

His reply: "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

Some soldiers come up and ask, "What about us? What should we do?"

John answers, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages."

Tax collectors and soldiers in Roman times were notorious for their corrupt ways. They often worked together, in fact, to fleece the common folk. The tax-collectors worked on commission. Can you imagine if you went into your accountant for help with your tax return, and they struck out a bunch of deductions because they earn a percentage of the tax you owe?

Someone once told a parable about a man sitting by the side of a river. He notices a body floating in the water. The victim is alive, but just barely. He pulls the unfortunate soul out and administers first aid.

Then, he sees another bedraggled, half-drowned soul, and then another. He pulls each of them out of the water, saving their lives. But more drowning people just keep floating down the river.

How long must this go on — the author of this little parable wonders — before the man decides to hike upstream and do something about whoever’s throwing people into the river?

Martin Luther King Jr. makes a similar point, reflecting on Jesus’ famous parable of the good Samaritan:

“On the one hand, we are called to play the good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.” —Martin Luther King Jr., in a speech “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence”

Let’s be honest. How many of us “look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth” at Christmas time? Maybe we ought to — at least that’s what John the Baptist is telling us, with his talk of giving away half the clothes in our closets and half the food on our plates. Somehow, those Christmas lists of ours take on a different character when viewed through the wild and passionate eyes of John, don’t they?

When most of us think of Christmas, what comes to mind is peace and contentment. The image of the sleepy Christ child cradled in his mother’s arms. The soft glow of a candle, beaming from a windowsill. A blanket of new-fallen snow, transforming this gritty world into a place of beauty and wonder.

The reality is, though, that the Bible’s Advent and Christmas passages have a thread of justice woven through them. It’s not just the fiery preaching of John the Baptist — which some

may be inclined to write off as a wacky prologue to the main story. The coming of Jesus, the Messiah, into the world, *is* a story of justice, through and through, perhaps the greatest story of justice ever told.

Take the meeting between Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth, who is John the Baptist's mother. When those two expectant mothers meet one another, the child in Elizabeth's womb "leaps for joy" (Luke 1:44). John and Jesus are more than cousins. They're also kindred spirits.

This becomes instantly clear as Mary breaks forth into song. That song she sings, the "Magnificat," is the first Christmas carol ever, although it's a carol like few others. The God Mary celebrates is a God of strength and action, who intervenes powerfully in the world on behalf of the oppressed. This God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly ... has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:51-53).

And how *is* it that God is acting, in these prophecies and histories of the Messiah's birth, to challenge the oppressive structures of money and power that make the world go round? God's doing it through the humblest and subtlest means imaginable: through Mary's pregnancy. The child who is, even now, growing in her womb will be the One through whom God brings about this great reversal.

We can see it, too, in the ones to whom God sends angels as messengers. Without exception, everyone in the Christmas story to whom an angel appears is a nobody.

First, an angel speaks to John's father, Zechariah. Now, Zechariah does happen to be a priest — a position of some influence — but he's not the high priest. Zechariah's hardly a mover or shaker in that society. He's more like a country parson.

Next, an angel appears to Mary: a poor, peasant girl, a person of low social status. “Greetings favored one!” the angel says to her. Mary’s never been addressed that way in her life! “*Favored one?*” What favor is there in being a girl of maybe 14, whose only lot in life is to be betrothed by her parents to a man she barely knows, then live the rest of her days hauling water, baking bread, beating wet laundry on the rocks down by the stream, and bearing her husband’s children? Yet, it is to none other than Mary that the angel comes. Mary — not some jewel-bedecked princess in an opulent palace — Mary is the favored one, in God’s eyes.

Next, a whole company of angels appears, en-masse, to a gaggle of shepherds on a hillside outside Bethlehem. Shepherds, in that culture, are more than just common folk. They’re the castoffs, the day laborers, the riffraff. Other, more respectable folk looked on them with disdain and distrust.

Who would be the contemporary equivalents today ... the shepherds of our society? To whom would the angels sing, were they to appear today?

No doubt they’d appear in one of those muster zones where day laborers gather, looking for work. God’s messengers might sing of the Savior’s birth not in English, but in Spanish!

As for us, we’d more than likely be the good citizens of Bethlehem, those respectable ones who locked their doors when they heard the voice of some poor transient out in the street, shouting something about his wife being pregnant, and needing a place — *any* place — for her to deliver her baby.

Christmas, to be sure, is meant to comfort us with news of God’s love for all humanity. But there’s also a secondary message, equally important to the gospel-writers.

That message is meant to confront us — yes, *us!* — with all the ways our world still doesn't measure up to God's standards of justice, and how we, by our actions, can make a difference.

Now, those may not be the “tidings of comfort and joy” many are expecting from a sermon in the weeks before Christmas. But we preachers really have no choice about delivering such a message. We have no choice because that's what the Advent Scriptures clearly say.

So, what *is* John the Baptist's Christmas giving advice? Or, in other words, how do we answer the question posed by those people in the Bible who come up to him and ask, “What should we do?”

The answer's pretty much the same as the one he spoke to them. Do some Christmas giving, only don't limit your giving to “the usual suspects,” the ones who gather around your Christmas tree each year, who give *you* gifts in return. Give to the least, the lost, the lonely. Give to them directly if you know any such people. Or give through Divinity and our mission; which includes our Food Pantry, the Redeemer Crisis Center, Parma Park School families in need, the Lakeside Homeless Shelter as part of Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries, and most recently we are sponsoring two Afghan refugee families, and many other ministries through Lutheran World Hunger and Disaster Relief.

As we do so, we follow the example of none other than Jesus himself. For Jesus ultimately came into this world to give. He came to give himself, on the cross, so that we may have life, and have it abundantly.

It was no easy gift he gave. It demanded all he had, and all he was. But look at the result: a world set free from the power of sin and death!

The best way to honor his gift to us is to pass it on, by giving to others in his name.

May the peace of God . . .

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