

2nd Sabbath of Advent
Holy Communion
December 4/6, 2009

John the Baptist, Christmas and You
Luke 3:1-6
A Different Christmas

When we look in the Bible to define Christmas we discover something quite different generally from what we hear, see and experience in our society and in the world. A significant difference is found in the role John the Baptist plays in Christmas.

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I should let you know that LEON has appeared. Some of you have been anxiously waiting for that announcement, I know, because you've been asking me, "When does LEON show up this Advent?" Some of you haven't a clue what I'm talking about. Here's the story.

Once upon a time, when the Nixon clan still gathered on Christmas Day at the home of our parents, Harmon and Louise, to share delicious homemade food, gifts and good times, something unusual happened. The house was decorated for the holidays with a tree in the living room around which we placed our gifts to be opened. There were also four candlesticks with red candles in the large picture window near the front door. The candlesticks were in the shape of letters that spelled "NOEL" as we entered Mom and Dad's house. Noel, of course, is the French

word for “Christmas.” As the evening progressed, there came a knock on the door, a neighbor dropping by just to wish us a Merry Christmas. Upon entering he asked, “Who is Leon?” “Leon?” we responded, puzzled by the question. “Leon who?” my mother asked. He pointed to the candlesticks in the window that had been rearranged to spell “LEON,” thanks to my prankster nephew.

LEON has become a symbol at PHUMC that we, along with most of the world, tend to get Christmas backwards and focus on something other than its true significance, namely, God’s gift of the Christ child. LEON has continued to show up in many places and many forms. This year, LEON appears in a unique form: a children’s Christmas musical entitled (believe it or not), “The First Leon,” with the subtitle “Uncovering the True Meaning of Christmas.”(1) How Dennis and Nan Allen, who wrote and composed the musical, heard about LEON, I don’t know. What I do know is that the musical will be presented this evening by our PHUMC Music Ministry with children portraying and singing the roles. They know how to spell Christmas and what it’s truly about.

So did John the Baptist. For years I’ve been trying to get to Christmas without having to deal with John the Baptist during Advent. Believe me, I’ve tried! And if you depend upon the Holy Scriptures to tell the story there’s no way you can get to Christmas without

encountering John. Matthew, the first gospel, tells beautiful stories of Joseph's dream of an angel announcing the birth of the Messiah, the journey to Bethlehem, the story of the Magi, and the escape from King Herod into Egypt. It appears that you might just get to Christmas without having to hear from John. But there he is in the third chapter, standing out in the Jordan River, a little late, but he made it.

Mark's brief account doesn't even have a birth narrative but begins with John the Baptist in the wilderness preparing for the Messiah. Mark says the good news of Jesus begins with John the Baptist, no doubt about it.

The fourth gospel, John, is so unique and philosophical. It describes the Word of God in creation that became incarnate in Jesus the light of the world. John's right there in the second paragraph of the first chapter, sixth verse. "There was a man sent from God whose name was John."(1:6), giving testimony to the true light coming into the world.

Luke, our gospel for today, begins with the story of John's birth to aging, faithful parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth who was a cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary and Elizabeth were pregnant at the same time. John and Jesus were second cousins, grew up knowing each

other. Luke tells us that John recognized Jesus as the Messiah and later baptized him in the river Jordan.

So, it's really impossible to get to Christmas without meeting up with John. And if you really want to know what Christmas is all about you're going to have to deal with him because he's there in all four gospels. I'm telling you this because if you turn to the Bible to find out how to get ready for Christmas, rather than relying on "holiday" catalogues, advertisements, parades and television specials, then you're going to run into John the Baptist.

And what John says to us is not really what we want to hear this time of year. He's only got a one-word sermon that he preaches over and over again. "Repent! Repent! Repent!" he screams out across the Judean wilderness. No wonder he's out there. The bishop probably sent him out there where nobody would have to listen to him or look at him. After all, he's eccentric, a prophet dressed in wild animal skins, existing on a diet of insects and wild honey. Who'd want to listen to him? And, yet, Luke says, crowds came out into the wilderness from all over to hear John. Maybe they went for entertainment!

What they heard from him is the same thing we hear from him every year, namely, that we're going to miss out on Christmas unless we

change in some fundamental ways. I don't know about you, but that's not what I want to hear. I'd rather sing beautiful carols, light bright candles and think about packages under the tree with my name on them.

So, what does John mean when he says that we need to repent? The biblical definition of repentance is "change." It doesn't mean to be sorry; it means to do something about the stuff that's wrong in your life; it means to turn and go in another direction.

I tend to think that God is pretty much satisfied with the way I live. So, I ask: What do you mean, John, when you tell me to change or miss out on Christmas? And John looks at me and says, "Are you practicing what you preach, Vic." Well, I say, after all, I am the senior pastor of this church. I didn't get here by practicing something else, John!" "I know," he says, "but every one can stand some improvement—and you're no exception."

Well, you know, that's true—but not what I want to hear. And yet, John stands there waiting for you and me to respond because John knows that when it comes to faith it isn't enough to talk the talk. You've also got to walk the walk. Practice what you preach, do what you say you believe, get some integrity, he says. That's repentance.

Well, I've heard enough, but old John doesn't stop there. He fixes his eye on you and me and says, "Are you doing what is right and just for others, or are you just looking out after yourself? What about the clothes in your closet you never wear, the boy toys you don't use any more, the cash you're hoarding, the books you've accumulated gathering dust on the shelf, stuff that someone could use and that you need to unload?" John believed that morality is a serious business—and not just personal business alone; morality is also corporate. Which means that what you do is not just your business alone, even if you are the ruler or head of the company or a senior pastor. What you do or do not do can hurt or harm or bless somebody else. You'll never hear a prophet shout, "Do what you like!" Prophets shout, "Do what God has told you to do!" And that's the kind of repentance, John says, that leads to Christmas.

I ask: John, why do you always preach repentance at Christmas? No wonder your picture is not on Christmas cards! Why don't you preach about joy, peace and love, and sing "Away in a Manger"? John just glares and says, "There's nothing wrong with any of that. We're just not there yet. It's not time to celebrate. This is decision time. You've got to decide where your loyalty is: the kingdom of God or the rulers of this world, Christ or Herod. Until you decide that, you're not ready for Christmas. God came into this world to change it—and God wants to begin with you. So, follow Jesus."

You know, John is right. Until you and I begin to change and follow Jesus, we're never going to experience the real meaning of Christmas. Repent! Repent! Repent! Thanks be to God. Amen.

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1. By Dennis and Nan Allen. Copyright: MMIII Brentwood-Benson Music Publishing, Inc.