

The Christmas Intruder

Luke 3:7-18

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First Presbyterian Church
Greensboro, North Carolina
December 9, 2018
Second Sunday of Advent

My mother had a penchant for using colorful figures of speech and colloquial sayings. One of her favorites that I still hear from time to time is that someone or some thing was “conspicuous by its absence.” You know how it is, you go to a school play and neither parent of the fourth grader with the leading role is present. Mama would have said that the parents are “conspicuous by their absence.” So there are people you might have expected to be somewhere in the audience, camera in hand perhaps, or standing around the punch bowl afterwards at the little reception for the cast, but they are nowhere to be seen —and thus they are all the more noticeable because they are nowhere to be seen. They are “conspicuous by their absence,” as my mother would say.

A few years ago, the *Charleston Post and Courier* had a picture of an outdoor nativity scene from the Saint Albans Festival of Lights in West Virginia. There was the outline of a stable. There were sheep and donkeys and camels, even shepherds and wise men with a star and an angel above them. There was even a palm tree visible on the horizon. But I guess in an effort to be politically correct or religiously neutral, there was no mother or father and no baby in the manger. There was nothing but the stable and the supporting cast of men and animals. No holy family was there to be seen. Mother would have said they were “conspicuous by their absence!” (And quite frankly, my mother would have a lot more to say about that as well!)

But while some things and some people are *conspicuous by their absence* and thus all the more evident because they are nowhere to be seen, others are *conspicuous by their presence*. That is to say, they show up in the most unexpected and illogical of places and leave an observer dumbfounded, thinking, “What are you doing here?”

I remember visiting a neighborhood outside of New Orleans some years back and we drove to see some houses that were decorated to the max for Christmas. Sacred and secular symbols of the season were displayed in colorful lights and in stereo sound. At one of the houses the nativity scene featured Frosty the Snowman standing among the shepherds and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer peering into the manger. Whether it was whimsy or a theological statement, I have no idea. Another nativity scene in the neighborhood featured a

Santa Clause kneeling before the manger beside with the magi. At any rate, in such a sacred tableaux I thought that Frosty, Rudolph, and Santa seemed . . . well conspicuous by their presence. That is to say they were all the more noticeable because they were so strangely out of place. They were intruders into the Christmas story, if you know what I mean.

Today we are considering another Christmas intruder. Every Advent he shows up on the scene amid the sacred story and in the assigned lectionary passages for the season Advent. He seems an intruder, conspicuous by his presence. We may well wonder why he is always a part of the season's focus. We might well think, "What is he doing here?" This character might be called the "curmudgeon of Christmas." You cannot help but notice him if you are dealing with liturgy in Advent and in the minds of many he is oddly out of place.

His name is John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the cousin of Jesus, but better known to generations then and now as John the Baptist. Almost invariably one of the lectionary texts during Advent invites us to consider this odd "troubler of Israel," dressed as he is in camel's hair with his strange diet of locusts and wild honey, proclaiming vehemently a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. John the Baptist is cut right out of the mold of the old Hebrew prophets and, as they would do, he thunders against sin and unrighteousness and calls into question the loyalties, the values, and the public and private lives of his listeners. John the Baptist makes us uncomfortable because he sees right through us and demands that we change our habits and our hearts. He is preparing the way for the coming Messiah, making the path straight and smoothing out the crooked and rough edges with his preaching, with is abrasive as sandpaper.

Oh, for sure the crowds sure went out to see him there in the wilderness, preaching and baptizing beside the Jordan River. He was something of a spectacle! There he was castigating and condemning those of high and low degree. The crowds surely loved it when the religious leaders, the Roman soldiers, and the despicable tax collectors came under the search light of John's preaching. But eventually he hit all of them. No one escaped the refiner's fire. No one was guiltless, and all were called to repent and be baptized. Before the Messiah arrived, they were admonished to be cleansed. They were being judged and made ready. And you know what? If John came among us this morning he might be in a camel hair sport coat but I think John would say the same thing to those of us still waiting for the savior's coming. If we really want to know how to get ready for the Lord's coming, then we need to hear and heed this hard preaching from this Christmas intruder, John the Baptist.

To be sure, John the Baptist is an intruder of sorts onto the Christmas scene. He calls us to examine what we would rather not consider. We much prefer to focus on joy and peace and hope and love all those warm and fuzzy feelings of affection and good-will. After all, we want and expect Christmas to be a happy holiday, don't we, with its angels and shepherds and wise

men. We want love all around and God to bless us everyone. But in our saner and more biblically informed moments we know that one cannot get to Christmas morning by any other route than that of Advent. To get to Bethlehem, one must walk the road of repentance and confession.

Unpopular though he may be, John the Baptist and his message provide a needed corrective for our syrupy and often superficial sentimentality when it comes to Christmas. As individuals, as a church, as a culture we dare not avoid an unpleasant truth about ourselves. We, too, are sinners one and all. Like John's first audience, we also can be a brood of vipers, dismissing or resisting our needed repentance, assuming we have no sins to confess and no habits to amend. After all, we too are spiritual descendants of Abraham. Even better, we are confirmed Christians and members of the elect, Calvinistic, Reformed family of faith. What is more, we prayed the prayer of confession right out of the morning bulletin and we even heard the assurance of pardon. With decorum and liturgical propriety we have repented and confessed decently and in order. Or have we?

With the first audience in the desert, we would do well to ask with them, "What then should we do?" And I believe John's message to us would not vary some twenty-one centuries later. John would tell us that we not only need to repent but that our lives should show the fruit of repentance. He would tell us that we are to share our goods with those who are in need. How many coats do you have in your closet and how many people have none? Recently a bank in Charleston said it would buy a new pair of shoes for someone in need for every two-used pair turned in. I carried fifteen pairs of shoes seldom if ever worn to the bank. So sharing with those in need is one of the things we should do. John tells us that to prepare for the Lord's coming we are to be generous and compassionate. These are signs of true repentance. Not just feeling these things but acting on them. I am afraid that with respect to repentance when all is said and done, usually more is said than done.

What is more, repentance is expressed by being honest and upright. John does not tell the tax-collectors to give up that detested occupation. He only charges them to collect what is rightfully owed and to resist the temptation to profit at others expense. He tells the military, not to lay down their arms, but to be honest and fair and considerate of those who might be in a position to be bullied or abused. And he also tells them to be content with their wages.

The crowds in the wilderness were so impressed by this charismatic and wild-eyed preacher who condemned and corrected all equally with no regard for status or ethnicity or even religious affiliation. They were thinking that this may well be the long-awaited Messiah standing before them and calling for changed lives and changed affections. But John nipped that thought in the bud and told them that he could not begin to compare with the one who

would soon arrive. He was only the advance agent, the one making preparations for the coming deliverer.

Friends, would you like to prepare for the Savior's arrival in this Advent season? Then heed the message of John the Baptist. We do not prepare for the Lord's coming simply by putting up our decorations, baking our Christmas goodies, sending out our Christmas cards, or even showing up for worship. These actions are not inappropriate, to be sure, but they are clearly secondary, even unrelated. What the Lord expects and requires is genuine repentance, honest confession, lives cleansed of corruption and deceit, of selfishness and materialism, and lives marked by generosity, compassion, and integrity. We prepare for the Lord's coming by renewed commitments to Godly living day-in and day-out.

This is the message we all need to hear as Christmas approaches. And as much as we might wish to accentuate the positive and avoid the negative, the fact remains that before the Savior arrives there is some hard and unpleasant work of repentance that must proceed it. John's message then and now may not be a pleasant one to hear. His preaching makes all of us nervous and uncomfortable but look at the surprising and unexpected comment in verse 18: "So, with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people." *Good news*, the Gospel writer call it. It may not have sounded or felt like good news at the time. But unless and until you know the bad news of your own sinful condition, until you are brought face to face with your own corruption, your own distorted values, your own devious practices, then you will never be in a position to hear or receive the good news of deliverance in Christ Jesus to those who repent, to those who are determined not simply to be sorry for their sin, but to change the course of their actions and their affections, and to embrace with God's help the life he invites and enables us to live.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen