

How Much Is Enough?

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,
on December 12, 2021, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.
Scripture: Luke 3:10-14
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In the 2006 comedy *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, there is a scene in which the title character, played by Will Farrell, says grace while presiding over the family meal. I could actually show you a clip of this scene, but it's a bit crass for Sunday morning worship, so I'll just give you some relevant quotes, and we'll post a YouTube link in the chat that you can click on and save to watch after worship.

In this scene, Ricky clasps his hands and closes his eyes, and begins his prayer by addressing "Dear Lord baby Jesus," and goes on to give thanks for the "bountiful harvest of Dominos, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell," and then praises the attributes of various family members at the table. Ricky's wife, for whom Ricky has just thanked baby Jesus for being a "red-hot, smoking, stone-cold fox," cuts in with, "You know, Sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him baby. It's a bit odd and off-putting to pray to a baby."

Ricky replies, "Well look, I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I'm saying grace. When you say grace, you can say it to grown-up Jesus or teen-aged Jesus, or bearded Jesus, or whoever you want." And he continues his prayer to "eight-pound, six-ounce newborn infant Jesus, don't even know a word yet just a little infant so cuddly and yet so omnipotent."

Although this is a farce, and the whole movie is interminably silly, I think Will Farrell is making a pretty important theological point here. Don't we all like the Christmas Jesus best? The Christmas Jesus isn't challenging. He's manageable. He doesn't ask anything of us, except to love him. It's so easy to love this Jesus, who "doesn't even know a word yet," this sweet and tender infant, vulnerable and powerful in the way all infants have power over us. Wouldn't we rather hold time still, with the angels and shepherds and manger and cozy farm animals and the miraculous birth?

But just as parents are unable to hold back time with their own sweet infants, we mustn't hold on to the Christmas Jesus. And I think this may be one reason the lectionary scripture texts assigned to the Sundays leading up to Christmas aren't from the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke. Instead, they're from the Hebrew and New Testament prophets, calling the people to get ready and change their lives. Instead of a scene from the stable, in today's scripture reading, we're getting a scene from John the Baptizer. And John is definitely not sweet and cuddly.

John the Baptizer reminds us that Jesus will grow up. And he will ask of us difficult things. He will ask us not only to love him, which is the easy part, but also to change our lives, and change the world. And that, indeed is difficult. John gives us a glimpse into the difficult work that Jesus himself will call us to.

In Chapter 3 of Luke, the people are flocking to John to be baptized in the Jordan River. He uses some pretty strong language with them. He calls them “a brood of vipers”—definitely not cuddly—and warns them that “every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”¹ He calls them to repent.

Before we allow our baggage about the word “repent” to get in the way of embracing this text, let me remind you that the Greek word translated in the gospels as “repent” is *metanoieite*. And *metanoieite* means to have a complete change of mind and heart—essentially, to have a spiritual transformation. “What then should we do?” the people ask him. And, rather than telling them to get on their knees and pray that God will forgive them—something we often associate with repentance—he instead gives them some clear, simple homework: share with others the abundance you have. If you have a position of power over others (as tax collectors and soldiers did in the first century), do not use your power to cheat or harm others, but treat everyone with justice and do your job with integrity.

In this foreshadowing to the message of Jesus, John calls us to transformation, but not through extraordinary acts. Instead, he calls us to ordinary acts filled with extraordinary grace. John doesn’t ask us to change the world by doing the impossible. He asks us to do things that are possible—even easy—and that those actions we take ripple out to change the world. Practicing repentance, having a changed heart, means that, every day, there’s a new opportunity to reach out to those in need. As one theologian puts it, we don’t need a large taskforce and an initiative with massive global funding to cure hunger. We just need to feed people, one at a time.²

On this Sunday that our Advent traditions name as Joy Sunday, this strong text from Luke’s gospel may seem out of place. But I would disagree. Even though it begins harshly—brood of vipers and all—Luke ends the scene by calling John’s preaching “good news” for the people. This good news is a cause for joy. For one thing, John assumes that each of us has the capacity to rise to meet his challenge. Each of us is able to take simple actions of sharing. Each of us has the capacity to do our work with justice and integrity. Each of us is capable of becoming the even more generous, more compassionate, more honest, people that God created us to be. And this capacity is available not just to the privileged few, but to each and every one of us ordinary many.³

John’s good news reminds us that joy comes not from acquiring the perfect Christmas present on our list, or in having a perfectly decorated magazine-worthy home, or not even (in this pandemic era we find ourselves living through), being able to return to holiday traditions we enjoyed in the “before time.” John reminds us that joy comes when we take those small actions we can to bring about lasting change. Joy is sparked by ordinary acts of extraordinary grace.

¹ Luke 3:7, 9 NRSV.

² Jon Berquist, in a recorded conversation with Marcia McFee, www.worshipdesignstudio.com

³ “Joy, Wind & Fire: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Advent Week Three,”

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-advent-three>

I'm going to close with a short video that I found this week while I was preparing for my sermon. Unlike the prayer scene from *Talladega Nights*, this one I'm actually going to show you, because it's not crass or silly. You may have seen it, because it was very popular a few years ago and widely shared. It's an advertisement for a life insurance company in Thailand, so it does have a commercial purpose. But its message is profound, and it so clearly resonates with the message of John the Baptizer.

As you watch, I hope you'll notice the ordinary acts of extraordinary grace. Notice the skeptics that watch those acts, and how their skepticism turns to surprise. Notice the joy that multiplies with every encounter. Notice how the sharing begins to spread.

In this season of Advent, may we find ways to take John's words to heart. May our joy in sharing be multiplied. And may we spread the good news of Christ's coming to everyone we meet. Amen.

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9vFWA1rnWc>