

Sunday, December 16, 2012: Luke 3:7-18

December 4, 2012

It was a Thursday morning, and I was preoccupied with writing this article and considering the words of John the Baptist from the passage in Luke 3. John seems so out of place in Advent, I thought to myself. He speaks such harsh words of judgment and repentance when what we truly want to hear is Tiny Tim's "God bless us everyone" to put us in the Christmas spirit. Instead John shouts in our faces, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. . . . Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:7-9). This is not exactly a message that we find reflected in the holiday movies and cards that inundate us at this time of the year.

Frustrated, I left my office and my reflection on the passage to attend a meeting with the coordinator of family and children's ministry. Liz was explaining her ministry plans for the remaining months of 2012. My mind quickly shifted from Luke 3 to what we needed to do in the family and children's ministry at Kairos Church. Our congregation is growing, especially with young families, and Liz has an incredibly important role in helping us respond to this growth. Appropriately, she was talking about our need to add some infant classrooms, about how we want to think about volunteer teaching teams and about topics that would be covered in the Sunday school curriculum.

Everything was going well until she said, "And I want to take a Saturday in December to do the largest mission endeavor for children and families that we have ever done at Kairos . . . probably with international refugees."

At that point, I'm embarrassed to say, I laughed. I explained to her all the reasons why doing a mission outreach on a Saturday just before Christmas was a bad idea. For many people, including families, December is probably the busiest month of the year. They are focused on finalizing their plans for the holidays as well as completing their Christmas shopping. I told her that while I loved the idea of working with refugee families, it would be a mistake to offer this in December. We will not get much of a response, I said. It's not practical. It won't work. Let's wait and do

something in the spring.

Then the words from John the Baptist popped back into my head: “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” Was my reaction to Liz’s plan what John was addressing? Next my mind shifted to the three specific examples that John offers of a repentant life. First, he tells the assembled crowd that if they have two coats, they ought to give one away to someone who needs a coat, or if they have food, they need to share it with someone who is hungry. Second, he instructs the tax collectors to stop illegally lining their pockets and collect only the exact amount of money that the law requires. This would result in losing a majority of their income, but John says they should be satisfied with living with much less money. And finally, the soldiers in the crowd are admonished for using their power to extort money from the powerless.

These three examples are unified by the command to take whatever wealth, position and power that the listeners possess and give them away to help the poor, oppressed and marginalized. That is a repentant life. That is a kingdom-oriented life. That is John’s message to those of us who are excited about the birth of the newborn king as well as his return and eternal reign upon the earth.

At that moment, despite the logistical obstacles, the brilliance of Liz’s December plan began to hit home. Advent offers a unique opportunity to take John’s teaching and turn it into practical action.

According to International Justice Mission, Americans spend over \$450 billion a year on Christmas. Most of the gifts we buy are given to friends and family; very little is spent on the poor. Imagine the impact if some of those dollars were redirected to the margins of society.

If John lived and preached in 21st-century America, wouldn’t he tell us that if we want to prepare for God, we must be willing to repent of our insatiable consumerism? He’d preach that we must join Jesus’ mission of incarnating divine love and justice for those who have been forgotten and abandoned by the rest of the world.

If this is true, then Liz is on to something powerful. Perhaps our church and others should look to Advent as a time to pay particular attention to doing the reconciling work of the kingdom with those on the margins. Maybe we need to challenge our congregations to prepare for the babe in the manger not just by spending time on Amazon and eBay but by being present with those on the streets of our cities and

towns who are broken, powerless and alone.

At Kairos we are going to follow Liz's lead in a powerful and intentional way during the busiest month of the year. I trust we will get a great response from the congregation as our families spend a Saturday in December with international refugees who live in one of the most disadvantaged corners of Atlanta. We will do so to prepare for the birth and return of our King.

Will you join us?