

Thursday after Doris' Memorial, I commented to several what a terrible shame it is that we wait until after a person dies for family, friends and church to describe what a life they gave to us. Similarly, this sermon from John the Baptist, Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, Frank Capra's It's A Wonderful Life, Louisa May Alcott's Little Women, The Miracle of 34th Street, even A Charlie Brown Christmas, all tell a similar story. Each begin as if with regular persons like you and I (compared as we did last week with historic figures of power: The Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Annas and Caiaphas), who as ordinary people are confronted with a circumstance for reflection. John Baptizes them for Repentance calling people: "incestuous nest of blood sucking snakes!" Trust me he had far worse things to say about those in power! BUT the central person in each of these stories then confront a basic question of life: In each of these books/movies, does any One person's life make any difference? Not whether great Heroes who did something amazing that changed the world, made a difference: but as asked by the Tax Collectors and Soldiers of the Roman Legion, "What must I do, or Can I do anything to Prepare the Way of the Lord?" On this 3rd Sunday of Advent, is Christmas only about setting up the tree, eating too many cookies, sending out cards and a ubiquitous letter, needing to fly across the country? Where do we find JOY and REJOICING in Advent? Ultimately, I believe Luke is naming the question we all carry. Most of us will never be as wealthy as Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates, so if we are not going to create spaceships to carry people beyond the atmosphere, what are we going to do that will matter?

Ebenezer Scrooge was visited by Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Future, in order to bring him to question if there was still time to make a difference in his own life and in the life of others? Jimmy Stewart's Bill Bailey was taken by an Angel named Clarence to all the inconsequential circumstances of his lifetime (the evening you told the one you married who cares about lassoing the stars when we already have the moon, when you gave up your dream to empower someone else's, when you took a risk on someone simply because they needed help) for us to question if his life mattered. Jo published the story of her family's life, including the death of her little sister, examining what really matters. The District Attorney of Manhattan proves that a kindly old man with Whiskers is Santa because the US Postal Service delivers all of their dead-letters addressed to Chris Kringle to Santa at the Court House. Charlie Brown's gang and a hopeless tree branch are transformed by Linus reciting the birth of Jesus when there was no place for them in the world.

John the Baptist explained to Tax Collectors, "Just do your job." There is an old Walter Matthau movie, I think it was called The First Tuesday in October, where he plays a Supreme Court Justice and describes: We all want to do our part as citizens of this Nation, No one enjoys being taxed, We want to give The Government our responsibility for roads and schools and freedoms, but not one penny more. John the Baptist emphasizes here: Collect what the Government demands, without overcharging for your own benefit. What gives me JOY in this is that in all these timeless stories, including John the Baptist's sermon, no one was asked to do something monumental, to change the world, just simply to do what is asked of you at the time.

In all human history, there was no military as mercenary and brutal as the Roman Legion. Their function was to dominate, to control, to intimidate, and they did so for money. What a wonderfully odd juxtaposition to have Roman Soldiers asking of John the Baptist, what must we do to be Baptized, to live Christian Lives? And John tells them to do their job, not to bully, not to harm, just do your responsibility.

In Matthew's version of this sermon, John addresses the Saducees and Pharisees, which here in Luke, John addresses everyone as a nest of vipers, while insulting, what he is actually doing is addressing us as

nothing more than Being Creatures as we were formed by the Creator, not in the image of God, nothing more. Before we began Live-Streaming, even before we began video recording worship, this is the passage sometimes referred to as “Our Pastor’s Indecent Faith Exposure,” but do you recall why? Because as your Pastor, I had two coats and others had none, the “other” needs for you to give him one. This early sermon was a commitment to give you the shirt off my back.

My grandparents had what was called a subsistence farm, which raised just enough for the family to get by. During the War between the States my Great Grandfather had cleared the farm of trees with a Yoke of Oxen, and he raised horses for the Calvary. We would go there for summers, when there was a milk cow, and a Jersey Cow because it gave cream, chickens for eggs, and fields of hay to feed the cows, and our Grandfather would spoil us by borrowing a pony for the summer, because children have to have a pony.

My grandmother was not an easy person to live with. She was what my father/her son-in-law described as a tartar. She never smoked, did not drink, did not swear, she refused to put salt & pepper shakers on the table. She often began letters to us offering condolence for our having broken our arms because this was the only reason for grandchildren to have not written...

But my grandmother also had an idiosyncrasy.

Going to the Red & White Grocery Store was something of a religious experience as my grandmother never bought anything that was not needed/ or carefully selected, but also followed the rule that if you could not buy two of something you really did not need to buy one in the first place. Quite simply if you could not afford to buy two, you saved for the next time, when perhaps you could. The end of grocery shopping was like Noah’s Ark with everything lined up in the cart as pairs. But her grocer knew that only one of each went into her grocery bags, while the other of each was bagged separately. These she dropped off at church on the way home. Before Grandpa and the rest of the family could see it, before anyone else knew. She regularly made certain that if we bought something for ourselves, she also bought the same to be given to others in need.

We are continually bombarded by messages to compete, to get ahead of one another, to win. How wonderfully ironic that every one of the Classic films mentioned at the start of this sermon, initially were considered flops. While each takes place at or surrounding Christmas, none of these were marketed as Christmas stories. Christmas, like every other day of the year is considered for its commercial value. There must be a hidden clue among the Gospel Writers, that when they describe something as GOOD NEWS, what they are identifying is something which the world does not value, that God would! For us GOOD has been lowered in a Grading system to a C, Average, as compared to Above Average, Excellent. God separated light from darkness, creating an atmosphere, separated land from water, and all of this the Creation of Time and Space and Reality, GOD called simply “Good!”

Luke uses this story in what to our culture is a strange way. For Luke describes John the Baptist in balance with Eschatology, the completion of the world, of time and space and life. There are few topics which Christianity has handled as poorly as Eschatology. In the 1920s what was described as Classical Liberalism, considered the role and function of the Church of Christianity was The Betterment of Humanity. So the role of the church was Education, Civilization, Missionary Enterprises to make the world like North America all of which began to be questioned as exporting our values before the end of the 20th Century. In Contrast, there was the Eschatology of the “Left Behind” book series based on one interpretation of the Book of Revelation as an escape from this world as being beyond hope.

Luke does not follow either of those directions. Instead, as there was a Genesis, a Beginning, there must be a consolation which is not our authoring "The End" but an embrace of John the Baptist's vision. John Baptized with Water to welcome believers to change their lives to Prepare the World, knowing the Messiah would come who would birth us/baptize us with passion, with hope for compassion/in other words with fire. What a different sense of reality, If we embraced the time from Creation until expectation of the Coming Messiah as Our First Testament. Then the period from John baptizing with Water for Repentance through Christ's first coming, the birth of the Church and the struggles of churches to live into what they believed, and A Third Time Yet to Come when baptized with Fire, we experience real JOY.