

3rd Sunday of Advent – Luke 3:10-18

In many Protestant churches in America, worship services still conclude with public invitations to repentance, confession and faith.

Born out of this frontier revivalism, the practice was popularized in modern times by the Baptist evangelist Billy Graham and the national television broadcasts of his “crusades.”

As the choir and congregation sang a gospel song, usually “Just As I Am, Without One Plea” the evangelist would issue a public call to conversion and invite people to “come forward” to profess their faith in Christ.

Billy Graham once said that too much preaching sends people forth with a desire to do nothing at all.

Maybe the Baptists got it from the original baptizer, John. He came out of the desert preaching a radical message of repentance and expectation, a sermon filled with verbs: Repent! Bear fruits! Be baptized! His method was a call to action and he always expected a response.

That day at the Jordan, Luke says, the people were “filled with expectation” and asked John this question: “What then should we do?”

Freeze the frame right there for a second. It’s Advent, remember. We’re spending these Sundays preparing the way, getting ready. Someone is coming. Our holy days of preparation have been marked by a *promise*, a *voice*, and now by a *question*: **What then should we do?**

John, never at a loss for direction, had answers. It's a good thing most of us are sitting down. We're not going to like his answers much. They're not "spiritual" niceties like "be kind, be sweet, do random acts of kindness, love your mother, do unto others....."

Be warned: John had a habit of telling the truth.

First, he said, share what you've got with people that don't have as much as you. If you have two coats, that's one too many: Give one to someone without one. If you've got a pantry stocked with more food than you can eat, share some with people whose cupboards are bare.

To the tax collectors who came to be baptized he said, "stop cheating the people."

To men in uniform he said: "don't use your power to get what you want; don't lie; don't threaten; and be content with what you've got."

After John said these words, the people were "questioning in their hearts whether *he* might be the Messiah." Perhaps they felt the same thing you and I feel when someone tells us something we know to be true even though we've talked ourselves into believing the opposite.

A promise, a voice, and now a question: **What then should we do?** It's simple.

Resist the urge to make this season an orgy of acquisitions. Most of us have enough stuff. Closets full of clothes we'd have to lose 20 lbs. to be able to wear. More than two coats. If you want to get ready for the Coming One, start sharing like it's going out of style.

Stop trying to get more than you need. Life is about giving, not getting. We're all going out the same way; or as the old saying puts it, "you never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer."

When we cheat to get ahead, or get around, or get above, or get beyond, we make the gospel a lie and Jesus' birth a waste of time.

Be wary of power and all the things it seduces you to do. Stop leaning on those weaker than you. Don't insist on your way or the highway. Lies, threats, accusations are the work of the Devil.

"What then should we do?" is just another way of raising the question, "What do you want for Christmas?" I like the way Paul answers the question in the Epistle reading for today:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:4-7)

There's our Christmas list: Joy. Gentleness. No worries. Prayer. Thanksgiving. Peace.

The Lord is near. So, what, then, should we do? You know. Deep down, you know what to do. So, let's go do it, starting today. AMEN.