

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Greensburg, Pennsylvania
Saturday, December 12, 2015
'The Third Sunday of Advent'

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Psalm: (Isaiah 12:2-6)
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

What did you get for Christmas? That may be the most asked question during the days immediately following Christmas—"What did you get?" Children especially like to talk about what they got---"I got this and I got that." I remember when I was in grade school at recess time we would gather around for show and tell. We would bring a Christmas gift or two and show what we got... This isn't just a kid thing. Adults like to talk about what they 'got' for Christmas too. We cannot help but be excited when we get things. We love to get things. We might try to act calm and cool and collected on the outside as we open our gifts, but deep down, many of us are doing somersaults in our heads, because we just love getting things for Christmas. A question that is rarely asked after Christmas is over is this: "What did you give for Christmas?" I don't want to know what you got—I want to know what did you give? Have you ever asked that question? What did you give for Christmas?

I bet if you did that, you would catch someone completely off guard. Try it this year and see what happens. By nature, we'd rather talk about what we got—that's more about me, what I have—as human beings we are more focused on getting things than we are at giving things.

In the desert around the Jordan River, there lived a man who wanted people to change their attitudes toward their life and their possessions. John the Baptist was that man, teaching the people to repent. Remember to repent means to turn around, to change the direction of your life. John was preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah. The Bible describes how crowds of people would come out to see him—he was such an unusual sight—a man living out in the desert, dressed in a robe made out of camel's hair, eating grasshoppers and wild honey. And his message was so different from what the people were used to hearing—he was telling the people to change. As the crowds came out to see John, God revealed something to John about these people. Many of them weren't all that sincere. They were materialistic people—their god was their money and possessions. Many of them were not interested in changing their lives and preparing for the coming Messiah. John was a tourist attraction for them, and that's about it. That's why in verse 7, John calls them a 'brood of vipers.' In verse 8, John told them to produce fruit of repentance. Don't just stand there, if you are really sincere, if you really are repenting in your life, then,,, change, do something that people can see. Time was running out John told the people. In verse 9 he said, "The ax is already at the root of the trees and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." Jesus called John the greatest of all the prophets. And his words speak to us today. In many ways, we are like those people who came out to see John. We struggle with materialism too... The Christmas season can really bring it out of us, more so than the other seasons of the year. Christmas is that time of the year when we can be tempted to focus on 'getting things.' What did you get? Look what I got!!! Yet we know that the Word of God says we need to change, be more spiritual... Today, John the Baptist calls out to you, and asks you hard questions.

For example,,, if you know what is right—why do you keep on doing what is wrong? That's what John the Baptist was addressing many years ago. He pointed out the people's sins. But then he pointed the people to the Savior when he told the people in verse 16: "One more powerful than I will come..." He was talking about Jesus, the Christ. What is it that made Jesus more powerful than John? I suppose the fact that Jesus performed powerful miracles and John didn't. But something else made Jesus more powerful—Jesus was able to do two things that John couldn't do. Jesus was able to take away sins. Do you feel guilty about the sins you have

committed in your life? All the times when you have been so focused on getting that you forgot about giving? Do you feel guilty about all those times you heard the Word of God but then forgot about it within the hour? Jesus is able to do something that John couldn't do—Jesus is able to take your guilt away. He takes your guilt away by giving you something—his life on the cross. He gives you forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. That is the gift Christ gives to you and me and to all people in this world... Jesus gives you a pardon. Not just at Christmas. He wipes away your sins, off the books every day, every moment. He takes your punishment away, as our Old Testament lesson talked about. You are free to live as FREE... Of all the gifts you receive this Christmas, nothing is greater than that!

That's what makes Jesus greater than John—he is able to give you a pardon. And there is something else Jesus gives you—and that is the strength to change. They wanted to be the people who were focused on getting. "What should we do then?" The people asked in verse 10. And then, John gave them practical ways that they could change—look at verse 11—John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food to share should do the same." Share, John told the people. Change your focus from getting to giving...

Tax collectors were struck by John's message. They repented... They were forgiven. How might this play out in your life? How might this be the right time for you to hear John's jarring message? A message that would change the meaning of Christmas for you?

These people in our gospel story do remind me of the character Scrooge in the 'Christmas Carol.' At the beginning, Scrooge was very focused on getting and hoarding all his money for himself, and he did that to the point of hurting other people. By the end of the play, he was the opposite—instead of getting, he was more focused on giving and helping other people. What changed those people in the desert? As they listened to John, their eyes and ears were opened. Their hearts and minds and attitudes were changed... They felt the joy! Because of the Savior who was coming, **THEY FELT THE JOY!!!** The Savior who takes away all sins.

I am sure someone this year will ask you, "What did you get for Christmas?" And then, it is your job to relate to them all the material things you received from other people. But this Christmas, as you think of what you got, think of the gifts God has given to you. It's hard to wrap God's gifts—they really don't fit under the tree. But think about them—a Savior who has taken all your guilt away, think about that pardon, that forgiveness that is yours in Christ. Think about the sure hope for the days to come, for you and for others who will hear your life-changing message to them. None of these gifts seem very impressive to those who live in the world around us. They don't work very well for show and tell in schools. But these spiritual gifts that God has given to you are the greatest gifts of them all.

It is my prayer that these gifts will change you, by the grace of God, into someone who is focused on giving. What's on your Christmas giving list this year? As John the Baptist said, "Let the one who has extra give to the one who has nothing. Let us give thanks and praise to God who gives and gives and gives. Let us worship him our Christ, this Christmas by changing our focus from getting to giving.

Amen.