

ADVENT HOSPITALITY
Sermon for Advent 3: Lk 3:7-18
LPC, 12/13/09

Advent is a season of expectation and preparation. Christians prepare for and welcome the coming of Christ at Christmas.

This is what the hearers of John the Baptist did. We read in today's lesson from Luke about John the Baptist, and his message of repentance and judgment. John goes so far as to slam into the religious establishment for their hypocrisy. "You brood of vipers!" he tells them. The interesting thing is that most people did not respond to John's message of repentance with indifference or revulsion. You would think people would be angry or scared or just put off. But the text tells us the people are filled with joy and expectation. John has also said that salvation is near, and that ordinary people can participate in that salvation. The people are excited and motivated. "What then should we do?" they ask.

John offers very specific advice to three groups of people: the well-to-do, the tax collectors and the soldiers. The last two groups at least were despised groups, since they were the toadies for the hated Roman overlords. But John does not exclude them. John offers practical advice: Be generous. Be fair. Be honest. Repentance for John does not mean the performance of impossible tasks, or a complete reversal of your life. In this case repentance means to be as generous, fair and honest as you can be, in whatever profession you find yourself. We could do worse than to model our Advent repentance on John's model.

There is something that must be emphasized when Christians talk about what they "must do." The doing does not make God love us. The doing does make our salvation come about. God loves without condition. Nothing we can do can either make God love us or make God stop loving us. God loves, period.

Plus, we don't earn salvation by following rules, not even rules as good as being generous, fair and honest. John's followers are not making Jesus come to earth by doing good deeds. It's important to remember that our acts of repentance do not earn God's favor. Rather they represent hospitality for the coming Christ. They don't make Jesus come, but they make Jesus comfortable enough to want to stay awhile when he does come.

At Thanksgiving, Rich and I travelled to the Philadelphia suburbs to celebrate with my son and daughter-in-law in their new house (their first house). They spent weeks, and some considerable care, preparing for us, and also for our other son and for Margaret's parents. They painted, they carpeted, they furnished. And when we arrived at dusk Thanksgiving evening, before we had even turned off the ignition, they came streaming out of the house, literally with open arms, to welcome us.

That Thanksgiving welcome involved some considerable work. The house wasn't ready for us initially. There was some effort involved in making it ready. Of course, if

my son and daughter-in-law had not gotten everything ready, we would still have come. We'd have slept on the floor if we'd had too. But they went out of their way to be ready for us, and that made things so much easier for us.

Here is the point of comparison with preparing to receive Christ during Advent: My son and daughter-in-law did not make Rich and me come to Philadelphia by making their house accommodating. But their hospitality made it easy for us to stay with them.

In the same way, Advent preparations are to make ourselves ready for Christmas, and for Christ. We generally aren't ready initially. We are distracted by the cares of our lives. We may have accumulated some unwelcoming habits. We may have forgotten that Christ is our Lord and our behavior may reflect that omission. We may have to do some house-cleaning to be ready for Christ – or, more accurately, soul-cleaning. We may have to add some new furnishings, the way my son and daughter-in-law bought additional towels and bedding. Those new Advent furnishings might take the form of additional prayer time, or charitable works appropriate to the season.

But, our Advent efforts to accommodate Jesus do not make him come to us. Our Advent hospitality makes it easy for Jesus to stay with us when he comes to us at Christmas.

How can we be hospitable to Jesus this Advent, so that, when he comes at Christmas, it will be easy for him to stay? We can start by being generous, fair and honest. This is Advent repentance and preparation. This is Advent hospitality.