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Third Sunday of Advent: What Should We Do?

This Sunday's Gospel once more presents John the Baptist. John the Baptist has a particular place of honor in our tradition. He was the kinsman of the Lord who leapt for joy in his mother's womb when Elizabeth received a visit from Mary. He was the forerunner, the one who said that the Messiah was coming. He is the one who pointed to Jesus and called him the Lamb of God. He was the one who lived as a radical prophet, wearing animal skins and eating locusts and demanding a radical change in the way people lived. Our generation likes to close an eye to this aspect of John's life, but it is this aspect, this demand for continual and radical change, that fascinated the people of the centuries.

In today's Gospel the people gather around John and ask, "What is it that we should do?" Not what should others do to prepare for the Kingdom. Not how should the government change to prepare for the Kingdom. Not how should the Temple worship change to prepare for the Kingdom, but, simply and perhaps more difficult, what shall we do?

John told the people to be charitable. They should give the poor their surplus. The tax collectors are told to be honest, not using their position to enrich themselves. The soldiers are told to stop harassing and intimidating people.

John the Baptist challenged the people to be lovable.

He also challenges us. He challenges us to adopt a whole new attitude in life, an attitude of sacrificial love. This is the love that others will witness in us as a sign that the Kingdom of God is near. St. Paul put it this way to the Philippians. "Let your gentleness be known to everyone, for the Lord is near."

What is it we should do to prepare for the Lord? The first thing we should do is to look at how we treat other people and then make an effort to be kind, considerate and lovable.

The second thing on our to do list should be to ask for God's help and forgiveness for those times that we go out of our way not to be lovable. During Advent I always remember a little third grade girl who came to me for confession once years and years ago at Guardian Angels school. The little one plopped onto the chair, her legs couldn't bend over the edge, and just said, "Well, I've been naughty." I was wondering if she figured that God like Santa was keeping a list and checking it twice to see who's been naughty and who's been nice. After I stopped laughing I asked her how she's been naughty and she told me her sins. Then I thought, this little angel has grasped the point that she has freely chosen to do things that were wrong. And she wants forgiveness. In this age when no one wants to take responsibility for anything, when it is always someone's else fault, or society's fault, or our genes fault, this little girl knows that she has done wrong and wants forgiveness. I looked at her as she was talking that special dialect called third grader and thought this little angel is really lovable. Then I thought, that's how God sees us when we recognize our responsibility for our actions and seek forgiveness. He sees us as lovable.

We need to consider, simply speaking, how we've been naughty. It's not Santa we're concerned with. It is God. We have penance services and confession periods to give us the opportunity to say, "I take responsibility for my actions and I seek God's forgiveness so I can be a more loving person."

What is it that we should do? Well, closely connected with seeking forgiveness, in fact fundamental to seeking forgiveness, is offering forgiveness. We need to bury the hatchet, and not in someone else's skull.

Christmas can be the most hypocritical day of the year when we go through the motions of being at peace with all while at the same time we are still looking for ways to repay insult with insult, upset with upset, nastiness with nastiness. Anger for things that others have said to me or done to me swells up in me when I least expect it and wants to boil over in rage. Now if I am warm and fuzzy with those who have occasioned this anger while I am looking for an opportunity to repay them for their viciousness, I am a hypocrite.

John the Baptist was a radical. He called people to make a radical change in their lives. Sometimes we let the sentimentality of Christmas get in the way of our the call of the prophet. Christmas is about a radical change in the world and a radical change in ourselves. Maybe we cannot forget a hurt. But we have no right to let that hurt continually destroy us. We enter into the realm of sin when we let the actions of others be an excuse for our joining them in breaking charity.

What shall we do? Well, we need to develop and nurture our prayer lives. We need to make the time to speak to the Lord, giving him at least fifteen minutes a day. A half hour would be much better. Actually, we are not giving the Lord anything. We are making this time for ourselves to come closer to the one who is calling us. I'm sure that all of you, particularly our busy parents with little ones at home, would say, "Father, you have got to be kidding. I am so busy with things that I have to accomplish, how do you think that I am going to squeeze in another half hour in this busiest of seasons." If something is really important, we make the time for it. It makes no difference how busy we are. This is important. We need to be with the Lord everyday, even if it means getting up a bit earlier or going to sleep a bit later.

"Rejoice," Church tells us on this, Gaudete, or Rejoice Sunday. What a wonderful time of the year we are in. But all of this is just a symbolic recognition of the wonderful time of the world we are in. The Lord is in our midst. He is among us. He is within us. The Kingdom of God is at hand and we have been chosen to be members of that Kingdom. Rejoice.

What are we to do? We have to find the Messiah. Is this hard? Not really. Jesus is not hiding from us. It is we who are hiding from him.

May our immediate preparations for Christmas be a reflection of our continual preparation for the Kingdom of God.