

Advent 3: WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Luke 3:7-18 [MW18-41]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 16 December 2018

Here are three “seasonal” riddles or questions:

How long should a reindeer's legs be? Just long enough to reach the ground!

Why does Santa have three gardens? So he can hoe, hoe, hoe!

What did one angel say to the other angel? Halo ...

On a more serious note, did you notice the significant question

- that was asked of John the Baptist three times ... ? Three times!
by the crowd, by the tax collectors and by some soldiers
“what should we do?”
- the preaching of John confronted them
made them look at themselves, their actions, their lives
and realise something needed to change
- and so they asked John: what should we do?

It is a very good question, and one that confronts us in this Advent season

- so I would like to take that question that was asked three times so significantly
and ask it of ourselves in areas that we are concerned with these days
precisely as Christian believers

The first one that would surely be a question for those of us who are gathered here

- in the last days of Advent is:
“what should we do to keep Christ in Christmas?”
- this is more than something borrowed from an advertising slogan
it's a serious question for serious Christians in a highly secularized world
- recognising that each December season works hard
with great sophistication through a secular media
to de-Christianize the birth of Christ into a schmaltzy “Happy Holidays”
- so that we are offered, so to speak, an either/or choice
between Jesus Christ and Santa Claus.

What should we do?

- the first thing we might do is not dismiss Santa Claus, but reclaim him
put him back in the Christian tradition
- after all, Santa is St. Nicholas, a fourth-century bishop
he was what he was, not in spite of Christ, but because of him
- the two indisputable facts we know about him are
that he was enormously generous to the poor
and that he was very fond of children
- it is also known that he had a cascading white beard
which was not uncommon those days
and, being a bishop, he wore the customary bishop's robes which were red and white

So when you see Santa in red and white clothes with a white beard

- that is a fairly authentic portrayal of St. Nicholas
although he was much slimmer
- also, he did not use reindeer, but he did use a donkey
and gave, not toys, but food and clothing to those in need
- and he did it because he believed in the greatest gift of all, Jesus Christ
because he was an active Christian, because he tried to live the gospel

Over the centuries, others have tried to secularize him

- the British called him 'Father Christmas', the French 'Papa Noel'
the Dutch kept his name and called him 'Saint Nicklaus'
which became slurred and blurred into 'Santa Claus'
- but whatever they called him, his "first name", so to speak,
keeps his Christian connection before us:
"Santa", the Latin word for "saint"
- when we see Santa Claus, we see one who became a Christian saint
because he was inspired by the love of God

What should we do?

- we can remember and tell our children the deeper truths about Santa Claus
we can have Advent wreaths in our homes
and pray the prayers at our dinner tables
- we could send, and should send, religious Christmas cards
our homes could display a nativity scene, inside and out,
to bear witness to the world that
Christmas is not just, to us, a commercialized holiday, but a profound holy day

[pause]

"What should we do?" is asked a second time

- this time the question turns on how to live our beliefs
how are we to act if we believe the God-among-us of Christmas?
- for a response, let me share with you the true story of an Austrian doctor
who revealed why he became a doctor

He said that as a young man he had been conscripted into the German army invading Russia. One morning, on the outskirts of a village, he said, his unit was summoned to parade by the Commanding Officer. Having told the soldiers to stand at ease, the C.O. said, "This morning we have been ordered to shoot the Jews." And then he went on to ask for volunteers to carry out the orders. Not one soldier stepped forward. The officer, berated them, called them sniveling cowards and every other name in the book. But still, not one soldier stepped forward. So the Commanding Officer tried again, and this time he explained that the volunteers need not shoot the Jews immediately. They could use the Jewish women and steal their valuables and shoot them later. And every soldier stepped forward except three. One, was a Jesuit novice, the second was an actor from Berlin who was a homosexual, and the third was himself.

"When the others came back at the end of the day," he said, "I could not even bear to look at them. I could not even bear to eat in the same mess hall, to live with them. Because I was such an excellent skier," he continued, "I volunteered for the dangerous northern front where I stayed until the end of the war. It was that incident that determined that I would become a doctor and devote myself to healing."

I doubt there is any one of us, in our entire lifetime

- who will ever be in circumstances where we will have to make such a heroic decision
and heroic that was
- but there's no question that as Christians
we are faced with a hundred little decisions every day
to put on or put off, as St. Paul would say, the mind of Christ
- decisions about school, about cheating, about relationships, about fidelity,
about business, about sex

Every day we who celebrate Jesus' birthday, who call ourselves Christians

- are asked to make these minor heroic decisions that set us apart and make us different we Christians, what should we do?
that story offers an answer
- we are to live out what we say we believe

[pause]

The third time the question is asked, "What should we do?"

- it is directed to the everyday 'tone' of our lives
or, if you prefer, our spirituality
- for a reflection that gives us a context for an answer
here is a very short story written by a student to highlight the point of Christmas
- it is titled "Christmas Solitaire" and here it is in its entirety:

Deborah Foster sat alone in her apartment on 64th Street. Her apartment building was in an old section of town and in desperate need of repair from years of neglect. She sat motionless, gazing at her Christmas tree, or what was supposed to be her tree. She had found the tree two years earlier, behind some boxes in an alley. The tree was artificial, faded, and broken in many places. The ornaments consisted of a few strands of tinsel, a string of colored lights, and a little plastic angel.

Deborah got up and made herself a cup of tea and sat down to a game of solitaire. Solitaire was her hobby. She would play for hours, sometimes forgetting to eat. The cards were bent at the corners and faded from many years of use. After a couple of hours of playing, she stretched, yawned, and took another look at her tree. She studied it closely. Funny, she thought, as she keened her eye on the angel. It seemed to be smiling at her. The way the light reflected off it made it glow, almost filled the room with human warmth. The angel's arms were outstretched as if they wanted to hug Deborah.

She sat back down and listened to the outside noises. And then she heard faint footsteps, gradually getting louder; then some Christmas carols being sung. She saw a handful of change on the table and thought about giving it to the kids. She got up to get the change and stopped herself, thinking, "If I don't make any noise, they'll go away...." She never finished the thought. A loud crash echoed. The angel had fallen off the tree and was shattered. The angel's look was different. She was frowning now.

End of story.

What should we do? What should we do? What should we do?

- we are Christians
we carry that name
- three times people asked the prophet John that question
three times he answered

John said in effect

- first, we are to choose Jesus
- second, we are not only to live a life but a moral life
- third, we are to love

Choose, live, and love are the answers

- they are Advent's answers
they are Christmas's answers
they are the Christian answers to the persistent question

Let us pray ...

Come Lord!

*Do not smile and say
you are already with us.
Millions do not know you
and to us who do,
what is the difference?*

*What is the point
of your presence
if our lives do not alter?*

*Change our lives, shatter
our complacency.
Make your word
flesh of our flesh,
blood of our blood
and our life's purpose.*

*Lord Jesus Christ,
we await your coming,
filled with hope,
knowing your light will shine in the darkness.
We wait anticipating your peace,
and embracing your love,
may we reach out to share it with our neighbours.*

*Lord we wait ...
Come soon and fill us with your life.*

Amen.