

“What Does God Want for Christmas?” - [Luke 3:7-18](#)

By Rev. C. Craig Topple
Friendship Presbyterian Church
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I was eating lunch in the dining room with residents at Highland Hills this week, when a staff person can be heard down the hall singing: “All I want for Christmas...” She looks up, sees us staring at her, and the singing becomes a hum...”hm hmmm”.

In early December, a text message came in: *“please let me know what your children would like for Christmas” - Love Nana.*

Fortunately, my children have been busy at work compiling their list of what *they* want for Christmas. I don’t know if children write lists for Santa anymore; but they sure have Amazon lists? I’m pretty sure Santa has gone digital.

How many of you have been thinking about all of the various people you feel you should buy gifts for and asking--what do they want?
Do any of you find this task difficult?
Why?

Commercials have been giving us plenty of “gift” ideas. The Indie gift market was yesterday at Bishop Park, vendors’ tents throughout the park with items you may not have known you or anyone else wanted until you saw it. Rug of a Tiger lying on it’s back? You didn’t know you wanted that, did you?

Several years ago, a friend and mentor of mine, the Rev. Bob Chesnut challenged his congregation to consider during this time of year a different question: What does God want for Christmas? For those curious, he did this before Darius Rucker--aka Hootie--released his song with a similar theme

Do we like that kind of question? Does it spoil the mood? Is it just adding more stress to an already stressful time of year? Now I have to get something for God too?!

Or is it the kind of question we, of all people, church people, should be asking this time of year?

The Advent wreath helps us remember, we are in the season of advent--a time of preparation. A time to lift up themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love, as we prepare for the celebration of Jesus’ birth.

Do we dare pause, amidst all the wishes of Barney and Ben, and the hopes of Janice and Jen, to ponder, what does God want for Christmas?

Well, our passage for today encourages us to do just that. John the Baptist is on the scene. John probably has a beard--but that may be the only thing he has in common w Santa. John’s beard probably has locust legs and honey stuck in it. He’s an

antagonizing character, calling people out. Still, like a Trump rally in rural America, people flock to the wilderness to hear what he's got to say.

And, what does John say to them? "You brood of vipers!"

When looking at this passage, a dear 92-year old friend at Highland Hills said to me, Craig, if you preached like John, they'd probably run you out of your new church.

John is concerned about how people are preparing for Christmas.

He wants people to make room in their hearts and in their world for the coming Christ.

His message: "It's your life that must change... And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father.' Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there - children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants." John gets to the heart of the matter: "What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire." (*The Message*)

I don't think I'm far off when I say, we don't really pay much attention to John in our hierarchy of heroes of faith. How do we rank the people of the bible we look up to? There's Jesus, Peter, Paul and Mary, Moses, Abraham, and Sarah and on down the list we go...until this wild man John is forgotten. But the gospel writers put him second after Jesus. In fact, they have to convince the early Christians to pay more attention to Jesus, than to John.

So we should really listen to what John says, and come to find out, his message is really simple and practical.

After calling them, "venomous snakes", those in the crowd are convicted.

So they ask, "John, sir, **What exactly do you want us to do?**"

A to do list! I love those. Please tell me what to do.

In the crowd were tax collectors, collecting money for the Roman empire, who asked, "what do we do?" "Why," don't take more than what is owed," he tells them. "Don't grease your palms."

In the crowd were soldiers--*de facto* police officers, doing the bidding of the Roman empire: "What about us?" they ask. "Don't abuse your authority!" he tells them, "Serve and protect, and be content with your wages."

And to the general population, children of Abraham, who have also asked what to do, he gives this practical advice: **"The person with two shirts and plenty to eat must share with those who have none."**

Very simple practical advice, is it not? I mean, maybe John's not such a disturbing frightening guy after all...maybe? Of course, what motivated them to ask "what to do," was they feared God's coming wrath--A powerful motivator, which has been a successful preaching tactic in the past. But, in our modern day, we don't respond well to a "sinners in the hands of an angry God" message, do we?

Still, I think we want to do the right thing. I think we want to deepen our faith, and grow closer to God as we prepare for Christ's coming.

So we'd do well to listen to John and even heed his message. His message about what God wants for Christmas is very countercultural. It's: "be content and compassionate, be fair and be honest with one another." That's it. Write that down: "be content and compassionate, be fair and be honest with one another." That's what God wants from us.

It's counter cultural--because our economy works on discontentedness--You have to feel like you need more than you have. And we idolize the rich--even if that wealth came through dishonest means and unfair treatment of the poor--elect them to our public offices, appoint them to cabinet positions-- they're successful, smart people.

John says: "be content and compassionate, be fair and be honest with one another." Have two coats give one away. That's what God wants.

I came across this: "As of April 2024, there are 2,781 billionaires worldwide, with a combined wealth of over US\$14.2 trillion, up from US\$12.2 trillion in 2023. According to a 2024 Oxfam report, the world's top 1% of earners own more combined wealth "than 95% of humanity".

Statistics like this make John's words seem anemic: Uh, Elon Musk, if you have two coats, give one to someone who doesn't have one? And if you have some spare food, consider sharing some. In the midst of the Covid Pandemic, a compelling plea was made by the former South Carolina governor, David Beasley, who had taken the helm of the UN World Food programme. In 2021, he did call upon Elon Musk, and other billionaires to help. Mr. Beasley, in his best John impersonation, said to the 1% wealthiest people: "give around 1% of your wealth toward the hunger program, and we *can* solve world hunger." To Elon Musk, who had a net worth at the time of \$335 billion, he challenged him to give just a little tiny amount of \$6 billion--With \$6 Billion, Mr. Beasley said his program could feed 42 million people. Mr. Beasley told Mr. Musk: 'Great, you made money. Please, please help share right now in a one-time crisis.'

I don't know if Mr. Musk is concerned with the coming judgment of God as those people who flocked to John were. And, I don't know if he responded to Mr. Beasley, or to John the Baptist. But, what about us? We are here, preparing for the coming Christ. What should we do?

John the Baptist said, If you have two coats, give one away. If you have extra food, share. We're collecting food for the ACTS ministry. Thanks for continuing to remind us of that Caren.

And, if ever there was a Sunday to have a coat drive this would be it. Do any of you have two coats? What about two shirts, two pants, two shoes?

At the start of soccer season this year, Zia and I were organizing her soccer gear. Somehow, she had accumulated eight pairs of soccer cleats! Not all of them fit, but still. “To the person with eight soccer cleats....”

In 2010 Tracie and I, along with Ruby Gene who was 18 months old, visited Cuba for a month as part of a pulpit exchange with a Cuban presbyterian pastor. Toward the end of my time there, I was going to leave some “items” with the community, including shoes. I came across five teenage boys from the church. I only had one pair of shoes that I was going to leave. How would this go?

A boy stepped forward, and took the shoes. He looked to see what size they were. And in a quick decisive manner said, “they won’t fit you or you”--eliminating two of the boys. Two were left. He said to one, “you have a pair of shoes. So here,” and he stuffed them in the belly of the remaining boy.

In John’s day, a crowd of people living under Roman occupation, and all around them was corruption, poverty, and despair, they want to know: How can we prepare for Christ’s coming? What does God want? John offers Simple practical instructions:

Be content and be compassionate, Be fair, and be honest with one another. “And in this way, John’s call for repentance becomes [transformational]. It’s an invitation to authenticity, to true life. When John commands us to ‘bear fruit,’ he means turning faith into action. ([Wesley Rowell, Day1.org](http://WesleyRowell.com)) Layer on to John’s call to action, Paul’s admonition: “Rejoice in the Lord.” When? Always. And again I say rejoice! And what a pairing of scripture we have for this day, “Gaudete Sunday—when we light the pink candle, symbolizing joy. The Latin word *gaudete* means ‘rejoice.’” ! ([Wesley Rowell, Day1.org](http://WesleyRowell.com))

The text message came earlier in the week: “What do your children want for Christmas?” love nana. Children want lots of things. Gradually we mature spiritually along our journeys and consider not just what children want, but also what God wants for Christmas. ***Be content and compassionate, Be fair and be honest with one another.*** How much Joy to the world would come as a result.

“Friends, Jesus is coming. Liberation, joy, power, and love are coming—and they are already here because Christ lives and moves and has His being in us. This is the good, great news of the Gospel.”([Wesley Rowell, Day1.org](http://WesleyRowell.com)) Amen.