

3rd Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2018
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

(Fr. Renninger started this homily by unpacking several large bags which were near the pulpit. He had recently decided to clean out his closet at the rectory, and found himself counting the total number of coats that he owned. He showed the congregation 11 coats, and then confessed that he had many more still at home. So he continued...)

Let's see. When you add it all up, that comes to 27 coats!

On this Sunday of Lent, the key figure in the Gospel is John the Baptist. As we heard in today's Gospel reading, John caused quite the stir when he announced that the messiah was coming. He told everyone to repent. He told them to turn their lives around and to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. That's how they would be ready for the coming of the messiah.

John's preaching was captivating, and people came from all over to listen. They wanted, deep in their hearts, to be ready to welcome the messiah. So they were baptized. They wanted to repent.

But they wondered – 'what does it mean to repent?' In the Hebrew Scriptures, that word – *repent* – meant to 'change your heart, change your mind, change your life.' But the people wanted details. So they asked John – *how* do we repent? What changes should we make in our lives? They asked him, "What should we do?"

And his answer was this: "whoever has two coats must share with those who have none. And those who have food must do likewise."

So, let's review: How does John the Baptist tell us to prepare for the coming of the Messiah? Does he tell us to go out and get a Christmas tree? Does he tell us to go and buy more stuff for children and adults who already have more than enough?

Does he tell us to participate in a Bible study, or watch 87 Hallmark Channel Christmas movies?

No.

The way to prepare for the coming of the Messiah is to take an honest look at what I have, and an even more honest look at what other people don't have, and then to make the hard decision to share. To live more simply. To give.

So what would John the Baptist tell me about my 27 coats. I think he'd look at my 27 coats and

say, “Keep one, and give the others away.”

To which I would say, “Now wait a minute, John. I don’t live in the Holy Land, where it is hot most of the year. I live in Virginia, where we just survived a 13 inch snowstorm. The weather here is different than in Galilee.”

And if John were in a charitable mood, he might say, “OK, you can keep three, and give away the rest.”

Then I’d look at him and see that he is wearing a cloak made out of an old camel skin, and that for the last three months he had been eating insects in the desert. And it would dawn on me that I am not going to win this argument...

Give away your coats.

Let’s face it. The New Testament is very demanding. It requires that we do things that are unreasonable, lacking in common sense and downright shocking.

Whether it is John the Baptist, or Jesus, or St. Paul, the New Testament tells us that it is dangerous to focus our life’s efforts on acquiring, getting more, holding on to more.

Again and again, Jesus tells us that when we hold wealth and possessions for ourselves while others have nothing, it is morally and spiritually destructive. The more we have, the more we think we need.

And we rarely take the time to ask what all of this is actually costing. Not the sticker price, but what is happening to our hearts, our souls, our relationships, because we have decided to sacrifice our lives on the altar of money.

In 1970, the average American home was 1400 square feet. Today, the average American home is 2700 square feet. In that same time, American families have been getting smaller and smaller. So we are buying more and more house for less and less people.

Young adults leave college with crushing student debts, and then purchase McMansions which cost so much to build and so much to maintain. Because of all this, both spouses ‘need’ to work, long hours, and when they are not at work they are tethered to work by the electronic leash we call the cell phone. Countless Americans complain that they are exhausted, lonely, disconnected from family, and have no time to pray. They feel trapped.

Have we built the trap ourselves, without realizing it?

Then along comes John the Baptist, asking us to take an honest look at how much stuff we have... or better yet, how much stuff has us.

How do we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ? John invited us to courageously consider the possibility that another way of living in this world is possible!

But if you listen to that invitation, prepare to be shaken up!

I'll give you an example:

I know a family: two young professionals. They went to the best schools, and both got wonderful jobs in Richmond. They met on line, fell in love, got married.

On average, they both work 55 hours a week, and on weekends they are tied to their phones. When they found out that they were going to have a baby, they did what Richmonders do: they bought a house in Goochland. A huge house. You could film a mini-series in their guest bathroom.

As they continued to rush from one task to the next, from one day of work to the next exhausting day, they started to wonder... what will happen when the baby comes? How much time will we actually get to spend with this precious child whom God is sending to us?

And as they drove from Whole Foods to Wegmans to Gold's Gym, they saw the folks standing in intersections, asking for money.

And for the first time in their marriage, they started to pray together – out loud, holding hands.

And after a while, they had a sense that God was inviting them to change.

They sold the McMansion. They sold the fancy cars and bought used ones. They started selling their accumulated stuff on eBay.

They bought a modest home in a modest neighborhood. One of them now works part time. The other turned down a promotion in order to insure time to spend with the child.

Because of these changes, their child is growing up in a home that is modest in size, yet overflowing with a family which actually gets to spend time together. And the couple continues to pray together.

They saved a lot on money by making these changes. And because they believe that education is the best way to break the poverty cycle, they donate enough money each year to a local Catholic school to pay for a scholarship, so that a child who has few resources can receive the life-changing benefit of a Catholic education.

They made the Gospel-inspired decision to have less. Now they are able to give more to others, and give their child the most precious gift of all – time and attention.

This is the radical call of John the Baptist in today's Gospel. Some of you may be sitting there saying, "It's too much for me. I can't sell my house and do all of those things by Christmas!" Maybe not. But that young couple heard it, and they did it.

Maybe the message that you and I need to hear starts on a smaller scale. I have too many coats. In these days before Christmas, maybe Jesus is asking me to look at my coats, and my stuff and my time and my energy, and he is asking me to make a *start*... to make a *start* toward the kind of life the Gospel envisions. The kind of life that fills us with Gospel joy and lasting happiness.

Our stuff will never bring us joy, especially when we know that so many people are lacking the most basic stuff of life. So in this Eucharist I pray that Christ will help me to see, and show me how to start living in the kind of world he came to create... one coat at a time...

Copyright 2018 by Rev. Michael A. Renninger. All rights reserved.