

It's Not Christmas Yet.....Merry Christmas!

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Luke 3: 7-18

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When I was at pastor at a different church, I remember there was a couple who came to visit a few times with their three children before they finally decided to join the church. I was delighted that they joined, and they came for a few Sundays, but soon they started coming less and less and then not at all. So one day I decided to call them up and tell them I was coming to visit them. They must have known why I was coming. I say that, because when I got there they said, "We realize we haven't been to church in a while, preacher, but you have to understand, it's really hard to get three small children ready in the morning."

Well, at the time, Kelly and I had two small children, and I knew it was hard to get two children ready, let alone three. So I said, "I understand, but what you could do you know is start the whole process of getting ready Saturday evening. You know, you could give them baths Saturday evening and have their clothes pressed and laid out for the next day. That way it wouldn't be so hard when Sunday morning came around." Well, they looked at me like I had lost my mind. They looked at me as if to say that Saturday was all for them, and was I really suggesting that they spend part of their Saturday getting ready to meet God on Sunday?

Well, maybe I am becoming too old-fashioned, but I have to tell you that is how I grew up. When I was growing up we didn't just wake up on a Sunday morning and run around the house like chickens with our heads cut off to get ready for church. We would get ready the night before. Now, yes, I hear the complaints. I imagine some people might want to grab me and shake me and say "Rich, don't you know that there is far more to being a Christian than going to church?" Yes, I know that. "Don't you know Rich, that church after all is who we are and not

just where we go.” Yes, yes, I know that, too. “Rich, don’t you know that you should be welcomed to church no matter how you are dressed, because after all, Rich, it is better to come to church just as you are than not come at all.” Yes, yes, believe it or not, I even know that. In fact, I think it is frankly pretty silly to worry about what someone wears to church. But while all that is true, when I was a kid, I was taught that being in the presence of God at church was serious business. It was holy business. And you couldn’t just show up to something holy. You had to get ready, you had to get prepared. For us, part of that preparation for us was getting bathed and having our clothes ready to go on Saturday night, but that didn’t have to be what we did. We could have spent time in prayer or in scripture reading or in singing songs. The point is that we did something to get ready. We had some sort of process.

As you know, we are now in the season of Advent, and one of the things that professional clergy love to say to their congregations is that Advent is not Christmas. I can even introduce you to some pastors out there who believe this so strongly they object to having their congregations sing any Christmas carols during Advent. As long as the candles on the Advent wreath are burning they will only sing Advent hymns. And these pastors are tough people, because every Advent they will be approached by someone in the congregation who says to them, “Pastor why aren’t we singing any Christmas carols yet? After all, it is December 16th” And their answer is always “We’re not singing any Christmas carols yet is because it is not Christmas yet, it is Advent.” Well, what these pastors mean by that is you can’t just show up for something holy. You have to get ready. Just like when I was a kid the whole ritual of getting ready started on Saturday night. That was our Advent. But someone every year will say why aren’t we singing Christmas carols yet, and I promise you, I promise you that there are churches

all around the world right now where if you stay quiet long enough and listen long enough, you can almost hear those debates going on as we speak.

And if we were to listen hard enough and hear those debates going on, you may want to know whom I say is right. Given the fact that I am a member of the professional clergy and given what I have told you about how I grew up, you may think I'm going to say that my fellow clergy person is right. Well, that was once the case. Although I have always understood those who want to sing Christmas carols when Advent rolls around. Advent is not about emotionless, indifferent waiting after all. It is about desperate waiting. Can't you hear the desperation? We don't sing "Come Thou Jesus We've Been Expecting For Five Minutes", we sing "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus." Advent is not just about sitting back and saying the Lord will get here when he gets here. Advent is tired of waiting, and it is so tired that it is tempted to say let's make this all happen now. I hear people complain that every year the shops are playing Christmas music earlier and earlier. Of course they are, and why? Because people know that living in darkness does not work. They know that. And they can't wait for hope to come quickly enough. But you know what, when it comes to the whole debate over what we play during Advent, I now don't just understand, I now no longer think that tough-minded clergy person is the only one who's right. I think they're both right. I have titled today's sermon, "It is not Christmas yet...Merry Christmas" precisely because I think they're both right.

But how can they both be right? Well, maybe to answer that question it would help to take a look at the person of John the Baptist. If Advent can be given a face it is the face of John the Baptist. Because he is the person more than anyone else in the bible whose calling it is to prepare people for the coming of the Lord. And as John stood in the river Jordan, baptizing

people with the waters of repentance, he preached to the people who either stood in line to be baptized, or gathered around him just to hear what he would say. And as people asked him how to get ready for the coming of the Lord, he said to them “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none.” He told tax collectors to collect no more than what they are entitled to, and to soldiers he said not to take money by force, but to be satisfied with their wages. And as the people standing in line to be baptized or simply gathered around John heard all this, they naturally thought that he was the Messiah, or the Christ. But he said, “No, it’s not me. I prepare the way, but one is coming after me, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

Why did all those people who were gathered around him think that John was not just getting them ready for the one to come, but was himself the one to come? Part of it may have been the way he looked. John didn’t look like anyone else. He looked like someone that would only come around one time in history. This whole baptism thing was his idea. No one else had done that before. And he wore animal hair and had locusts and honey running down his beard. But I also think that it is because in preparing to be holy, we are already being holy. In preparing for what we are waiting for, what we are waiting for is already here.

You know something, if you have ever known anyone who has gone to Seminary, they will tell you that learning the biblical languages, Greek and Hebrew is really, really hard. And you may wonder why that is. Well, I want to tell you, as you probably know from remembering taking French or Spanish back in high school when you learn a new language, learning all the different verb tenses is a real challenge. In English, for example, we don’t just have past, present and future to say what we did, what we are doing and what we will do, but we have

past perfect to talk about what we had done. We have present perfect to talk about what we have done, and we have future perfect to talk about what we will have done. And as anyone who has studied a language knows, these aren't easy things to learn. But these are especially hard in Greek and Hebrew, because once you learn these verb tenses, you start reading the bible in their original languages and you come to see that all these people in the bible are using the wrong verb tenses, and it makes you want to pull your hair out. The virgin Mary, after she has learned that she would bear the Lord Jesus in her womb, sings the Magnificat, and she sings "The Mighty One has done great things for me." But Mary, you're using the wrong verb tense. At the time when you sang this song, the mighty One hadn't done great things for you, your son hadn't even been born yet. The prophet Isaiah says "The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light." But Isaiah, you're using the wrong verb tense. The light hadn't come yet when you wrote these words. And even Jesus says "The hour is coming and is now here." What does that mean, how can the hour be coming and yet be now here? Well, I think you sort of know, don't you. To experience God is to know that time with God does not work in a linear fashion. Getting ready for God's holiness just isn't like getting ready for a football game, or for a concert. In getting ready for God's holiness, we are already dipping our feet into God's holiness, aren't we?

And John the Baptist tells all of his listeners to get ready for the coming of the holy, how? By being holy. If you have two coats, give one who has none. "Don't charge people what they don't owe you. Don't take people's money by force when you already earn a wage. Get ready for the holy by pulling yourself out of the ordinary routine of a life of shortage, and anxiety and hopelessness, and entering into a life of blessedness, of thanksgiving, and hope." It is no

wonder that they thought he was the Messiah. It is no wonder they thought he was the one that he was preparing them for.

I began this sermon by asking you never to forget the importance of getting prepared to be in the presence of the holy. And I close by saying never to forget the importance of getting prepared, but in preparing we are being holy already. I close by saying that we have our Advent hymns and we have our Christmas carols, but I will also tell you that in singing “O Come O Come Emmanuel” we are already singing “Joy to the World.” I close by saying “It is not yet Christmas, but Merry Christmas!”