

December 4, 2016
2nd Sunday of Advent, 2016
Matthew 3:1-12

“What Do You Want for Christmas?”

I can't believe there are no fun John the Baptist carols. He takes up a lot of space in Advent. The second Sunday of Advent is always big on John. Here he is today, wandering in from the desert to call people who have taken the time to listen to what he has to say, to call these people venomous reptiles. To threaten them with fiery punishment. He tells the folks to have come out all this way to see him that God could raise up the very rocks to be his chosen people: “You! You! God doesn't need you!”

I can't believe there's not a carol about him. It's not like people saying rude things never happens in carols. “The Cherry Tree Carol” is about Joseph and Mary, when she's pregnant, taking a stroll. Mary wants some cherries from the cherry tree they walk by and Joseph says, “Why doesn't the father of your baby get them for you?” because he's not bitter.

So I don't see why there can't be a jaunty song about John. Maybe Bill Flanders or Jeff can meet that need. Maybe that would help with a more authentic celebration of Advent.

Advent, the way it was meant to be celebrated, is about repentance, about noticing the hurt in the world, about getting in touch with our need for God. It's about accepting that we're getting it wrong here on Earth and we need to change our ways.

The church's desire to teach this message, to make room for the voice of the prophet, the harsh voice of John the Baptist crashes headlong into secular Christmas – the way the woman with the shopping cart is about to collide with a Wise Man on the cover of our bulletin.

Secular Christmas begins earlier and earlier each year. I wish I had a nickel for every time I heard somebody complain about how early Christmas decorations go up in stores each year. If I did I'd have the money to buy more Christmas decorations. The thing is, the retail industry isn't stupid; somebody is buying that Christmas stuff in early October, or else it wouldn't be on sale at your local CVS.

This time, Advent, the time for preparing for capital "G" God to be born in us has been taken by a secular world that sees no end but buying and selling. The Advent Conspiracy, the effort by some churches to take back the season of Advent for more spiritual purposes notes that Americans spent \$450 billion on Christmas. I think that figure is a little old. The number I found from winter 2014 was \$601.8 billion.¹

This number was good news for the economy. Our spending feeds the engine of the economy that provides us with jobs and comfort and leisure. But the folks who thought up the Advent Conspiracy dare to ask, "do you even remember what you got for Christmas last year?" "Do you even remember what you bought for your loved ones last year?" What kind of lasting good did you do with what you spent?

They are asking John the Baptist questions that might lead us to interrogate our desire to consume and consume. The things we buy tend to be detached from the people or systems who actually made them. In China there is a word now that means to die from overwork, *guolaosi*, as whole lives are consumed by our desire for consumables.

John the Baptist called the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to hear him, vipers. The word for viper in Greek is different from the word for snake or serpent, like the snake in the

¹ <https://nrf.com/media/press-releases/holiday-retail-sales-come-nrf-expectations>

Garden of Eden. Vipers are distinct. Vipers are nocturnal hunters. They move in the dark. When they bite, they can choose whether to release their venom. If they bite a human or another large animal, they may not waste their poison; we are too big to eat. No, they can save their venom for the small animals, the vulnerable creatures who are easier prey. I have a feeling John the Baptist would know just what to say to contemporary Americans around this time of year.

There are vipers in this world; those who prey on the weak and do it in the dark, where it's hard to see. There are vipers who take advantage of the most vulnerable. The debt, the overwork, the waste generated by so much greed is what these vipers leave behind. There is a dark underside to all this Christmas mirth.

I'm not John the Baptist though. Some days I'd like to be, but I'm just not. I happen to like secular Christmas. One of my favorite carols is the *Boar's Head Carol*, which is mostly about food with one reference to Jesus thrown in like they remembered super last minute to keep the Christ in Christmas.

I've told this story before, but the first year I had money, from an actual job, when I was sixteen, I got my mom two presents. Her birthday is the 23rd of December and my sister and I were raised to recognize the importance of TWO presents, a Christmas one and a birthday one and birthday one is the big present. I bought her a bathrobe from Victoria's Secret and a string of pearls from White House/Black Market. Both gifts were \$40. \$80 which was a lot of money. My mother still has these things by the way. She still uses the bathrobe; I don't that she wore the pearls but once or twice, but I hope when she sees them she remembers that I wanted to give her something that would make her feel beautiful. See, I do sometimes remember what I bought for Christmas in the past.

When we interrogate our desire to consume, we can easily slide into scolding our love of things, our attachment to consumables. But things and our love of them are not bad. The things we can touch and, yes, buy are part of God's creation which is sanctified. We know this – things such as water, wine, and bread but also the silk of vestments, the wax of candles, the paper you will use to wrap your Christmas presents are the stuff of life, the stuff we use to connect with each other and with God.

I believe secular Christmas is the aching of a people to bring joy and meaning into the sorry broken world, a world that needs color, light, surprise, and delight. That's why the letdown, the stress, the anxiety, and fatigue are such a shock – the unexpected sting of snake bite.

Our buying and selling and desiring and consuming is screwed up, but instead of scolding perhaps what we need is a clarifying question. What do you really want for Christmas? What do you want? When the people who started the Advent Conspiracy asked themselves this question their answer was clean water for everyone. The cost of clean water is \$10 billion, a fraction of what our Christmas spending is. In 2006, the four Advent Conspiracy churches gave \$500,000 for clean water. Over the years, more churches joined and have given even more.

What do you want for Christmas? Seriously, I'm asking. What do you want? I want an end to gun violence...no more memorials to the lost in our courtyard. What do you want? There is a song about John the Baptist. We sang it this morning. "**Comfort, comfort** ye my people. For the herald's voice is crying, in the desert far and near, calling all to true repentance, since the kingdom now is here. Oh, that warning cry obey! Now prepare for God a way! Let the valleys rise to meet him, and the hills bow down to greet him."

You are not reptiles , dear ones, nor are you kindling for any God's fire. Though it may seem like poison is being injected into our world and that the fire is already raging. You are God's beloved. You can live in the world God wants for you, you just have to make it.