

Third Sunday of Advent – December 13, 2015

The crowds asked him, “What should we do?” “Can you be more specific?” It’s a perennial question. What is it that we – we who have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire – can and should do to better prepare for the coming of Christ? “Glad you asked,” says the Baptist. “Here’s a start.”

Open your closet. Could you spare a coat or shirt or pair of shoes? A nice Christmas outfit even? Imagine the joy these gifts might bring to someone in need. Your joy will be greater still. And God? God will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love.

Open your pantry. Advent is to Christmas as Lent is to Easter. A day of Advent fasting in solidarity with those who go hungry – there is joy to be found in that, especially if your fasting is joined with alms giving. A portion of your good fortune easing another’s misfortune. And the Lord, your God, will be in your midst.

Open your heart. To the One-mightier-than-John, open your heart. It is there that we first encountered Christ in baptism, and it is there that he waits in joyful hope for an Advent heart-to-heart with us. Make room for that prayerful conversation. Don’t be afraid to ask the question about specifics: What should I do?

Want to go further? Glad you asked. Then pick a value. Not one of those contemporary whims that pass as values, like “let’s keep in touch.” I mean a real value, like compassion or forgiveness or peace or justice. Something that has some bite to it and will be around long after you’re gone. For example, let’s take compassion.

Take a few minutes a day in the morning and meditate on it. Clear your mind of other thoughts and distractions. If they intrude, just notice them and let them go. Return to compassion.

It’s good to have a phrase to repeat silently and with purpose. Try this. “Everyone wants to be happy and doesn’t want to suffer.” As you slowly and silently repeat this phrase that makes you equal with everyone else, pictures of people you know may enter your mind. Simply use their names in the next phrase, “Joan wants to be happy and doesn’t want to suffer... Frank wants to be happy and doesn’t want to suffer,” and every so often say, “I want to be happy and don’t want to suffer.” Now you are in the same human mess as everyone else.

When you have done this for a few minutes, get on with the day. Don’t evaluate how the meditation is going. Dismiss all questions like “Did I do it right? Why am I doing this? Is it a waste of time?” Just continue to do it.

Also, you should read some stuff on compassion. Meditation is not enough. Now for the really important part. At the end of the day, review your time in light of your value of compassion. No doubt you will notice some things, some words that could have been done differently. Well, find a way to redo that situation. Don’t let embarrassment stop you. Just do it. You may be awkward at first, but you’ll get used to it. This is how we get better. A little. One last thing. This process is never over. Becoming compassionate is forever. I suppose we should just get used to it.