



SERMON

Preached

Sunday, December 13, 2009

Coulda, Shoulda, Woulda: What Then *Will* We Do?

*And the crowds asked
him. "What then should
we do?"*

– Luke 3.10

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When I taught a Sunday School class of three- and four-year-olds a few years ago, we tried out a new curriculum called Godly Play. It's an Episcopal curriculum based on the Montessori method of education—in fact, Montessori actually began her work in religious education. Each week, I'd gather with the kids in a circle on the floor, and use wooden figurines to tell a story from the Bible. When I was through, we'd let it sink in a little, and then we'd have our time of "wondering." I'd ask a few questions, each time beginning, "I wonder..." It gave the kids an opportunity to start putting themselves into the stories, to think about what it might've been like to be those people.

I did something similar after reading today's passage from Luke. I started wondering. I wondered why there were soldiers there, and if they were Roman soldiers or temple guards. I wondered if anyone did warn the people of the wrath to come, as John asks. I wondered what had driven each person to seek John out. I wondered about all kinds of details and unknowns in this story, but there are a couple things I'm still wondering about: I wonder if the people regretted asking those questions, and I wonder what they did when they went home.

John was presenting new information to the crowds. Their cushion of being God's chosen people because of their ancestor Abraham was pulled out from under them. I love the way The Message interprets this passage:

When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: "Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your life that must change, not your skin. 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. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire."

What counts is your life. I'm sure the people gathered there were shocked and confused. "Our lives? What do you mean our lives? You mean just saying we're Jews and showing up at the Temple when we're supposed to and following the rules isn't enough? Wait, so you're saying we can't just get dunked in the Jordan River and say we repent and be good to go?" These people had based their whole lives on this belief, this sense of security, and now, along comes John, saying, "Ehhh! Wrong!"

So then they ask that question, probably anxiously, "So what then should we do?" The crowd asks it, but the tax collectors, thinking they might be excluded ask, "Well, what about us, what should we do?" And the soldiers, too, are worried, and they too ask, "Ok, well, what should we do?"

And John answered them, with simple directives that are a foreshadowing of Jesus' teachings. Share with each other. Treat each other fairly. Don't bully others. What I love about this is that he doesn't tell them to go out and change their whole lives. He speaks right to where they are. He doesn't tell the tax collectors and soldiers to get other jobs. He just tells them they should not exploit people, even if it was their right to do so. I think often we believe that God wants us all to be like Mother Theresa, or even like Kim and Patrick, our missionaries in Haiti, that in order to bear fruits worthy of repentance we must make huge gestures, change our whole lives. But as

one pastor writes, “Fidelity does not have to be heroic. There are opportunities to do God’s will, to be God’s people, all around us.”¹ But do we take them?

Let me go back to the wondering for a second. John answers the questions asked by him that day, in simple, concrete terms. So once they had their answers, did they regret asking the questions? Ignorance is bliss, after all. They got an answer, so they no longer have the excuse, “Oh, but we didn’t know!” Well, maybe they didn’t regret it at first. Luke tells us that after hearing the answers the people were filled with expectation, hoping that maybe John was the Messiah, the One they’d been waiting for. John quickly dispels this idea, stressing that he is nothing compared to the coming Christ, and then moves on to continue proclaiming the good news.

Here’s where my second wondering comes in. The passage ends there. In the next few verses, John is arrested, Jesus’ baptism is summarized and his ancestral link to David affirmed, and Luke moves on to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

But what about those people? Did they indeed leave the Jordan after hearing the good news and do as John said? Did they share their food and coats? Did the tax collectors start treating people fairly? Did the soldiers stop bullying people and trying to extort more money than their wages?

You see, I’m left wondering this because of the question they asked. They ask not, “What can we do?” or “What do we do?” but “What *should* we do?”

I’m not a fan of the word “should.” I actually gave it up for Lent one year. Seriously! See, *should* carries a sense of duty, the weight of “supposed to” or maybe more accurately, “ought to” without any move to act. The reason I gave it up for Lent, and the reason I wonder what happened when the people left, is that knowing what one *should* do, and what one actually *does*, are often completely different!

¹ David Lose, “Commentary on Gospel,” Third Sunday of Advent, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=12/13/2009#, accessed 12 December 2009.

How many times do we say, “Wow, I really should [fill in the blank].” And how many times do we actually do it?

See, John may have been sharing new information with the crowd by the Jordan River that day, but sorry, we can't say the same. We may need to be reminded of some of it, that simply saying “I'm a Christian” or having your name on the membership list of a church isn't exactly bearing fruits worthy of repentance. I can't say that it's not enough to win God's love, because that's freely given to us, no matter what, but God does want more of us. The label doesn't matter; it's our life that counts. And we have all of Jesus' teachings, all the sayings of the prophets, all right at our fingertips.

Unlike the crowd gathered around John, we already know what we should do. We *should* feed the hungry. We *should* work for justice. We *should* give generously. We *should* care for the sick. We *should* welcome the stranger, *should* clothe the naked, *should* visit the prisoner, *should* love our neighbors...should, should, should, should.

And of course, this time of year, society adds to our list: we *should* find the perfect gift for every person on our list, we *should* host fabulous get-togethers, we *should* feel happy and merry, we *should* send out cards to each person we've ever been acquainted with, and we *should* do this all while protesting materialism and stressing the true reason for the season.

The year I gave up should for Lent, I decided to do so because it's so ambivalent and guilt-inducing. I would be watching TV and thinking, “I should be reading for my next class.” Would I turn the TV off and read? No! I would just sit there and let that thought nag me. I would never just fully accept that I wasn't going to do homework and so I couldn't really enjoy watching TV, either. And maybe I had a good reason to just sit and relax for an evening, but those “shoulds” wouldn't let me. Of course, maybe I really needed to do that reading, but those “shoulds” weren't helping that get done, either! So during my time without “should,” I either did something I needed to or was supposed to, or didn't and accepted that I would deal with the consequences. And believe it or not, more often than not, I made the choice to act. I really should

call a friend I just thought of? Then that's what I'm going to do! This also applies to "should not."

Should is completely unproductive, and yet I think often we leave worship or board meetings or other church activities focusing on what we should do, which leads us most often to do nothing, but feel guilty about it. Instead, I propose we all stop "shoulding" on ourselves and act. Ask not, "what should I (or we) do," but "what WILL we do?"

In your bulletin is an index card. Dig a pen out of your purse or shirt pocket, or grab the little pencil in the pew rack (remember to share) and take a moment to think of something you've been telling yourself or feeling that you *should* do, and write it down as a vow of an action you will take. And remember what I said earlier about heroics. The feeling that you *should* help those less economically fortunate than yourself doesn't mean you need to single-handedly fill the Open Pantry box; maybe it means that you *will* pick up a few extra things the next time you're in the grocery store. The thought that you *should* use your sewing or knitting to benefit others doesn't mean only making things to give away from now on; maybe it means that you *will* make one prayer shawl. This doesn't necessarily have to be church or ministry-related; maybe you've been feeling like you should re-connect with an estranged family member, or like you should clean out your closets. This can either be a one-time thing (I will visit my neighbor tomorrow) or something ongoing (I will financially support the church this year). John was preparing the way for Christ; Advent is a time of preparation. By repenting—changing direction—and getting these "shoulds" out of our psyches, we are making more room for Christ. I'm writing one too; I'm just as much in need of repentance in this area! I suggest we place these somewhere we'll run into them a lot—hang them on our Christmas trees, put them on our bathroom mirrors, stick them in our wallets—lest they not get done and slip back into being "shoulds!" Here's one more suggestion: if you have a "should" that just is never going to become a "will," let it go. Deal with whatever consequences that will bring and move on to things that you will do.

When we leave this place today, let us be free of the anxiety and worry and guilt about what we *should* be doing, and instead focus on what we *will* do to proclaim the Gospel, to help bring about God's realm, to love one another, and to share the joy of the light of Christ in our lives.

Let us pray: God of fierce and fiery love, you beckon us to live a fruitful life. Help us to not just discern your will, but to act on it. Amen.