

### **Matthew 3:1-12**

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."' Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

### **Romans 15:1-7**

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.' For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

### **"Full Contact Christmas Shopping"**

**Rev. Charles Schuster**

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Okay, so I have been trying to learn how to play the trombone. It's coming along better than I think he said, except for two things. One is, I can't read music and the other thing is, I can't make the notes sound right. But otherwise.... John Allum, who's one of our trombone troubadours in the Stover Street Stompers lined out the music for me, so I know where the slide is, you know, I can begin to get it together. But I've discovered that I don't understand anything about music. And I came across something written by Harold Dunn, answers to questions put together by music students, state of Missouri. I have referred to this before, but some of these are new to me. Apparently, I'm not the only one who doesn't understand music. This is what some of the students thought.

"In music, refrain means don't do it. A refrain in music is that part that it's better not to try to play. A virtuoso in music is a musician who has high morals. A harp is a piano that's

naked. Aaron Copland is one of your most famous contemporary posers. It is unusual to be contemporary, most composers do not live until they're dead." And finally, "Music sung by two people at the same time is a duel." I'm wondering, since we've got the trio here, could you call that a feud? Like the one between the Hatfields and the McCoys in my home state of West Virginia?

Lots of us don't understand music, just like many people are confused about Christmas. John Defner has said that there's a window, around Christmas time, in a large department store in San Francisco, and the following words were on the store window, asking the question, "What is Christmas? Christmas is wide-eyed children, fairyland magic, age-old music, good will in the human heart." And then the question, "Is that all there is?" Good question. Two women stopped and looked, and were heard to say, as they looked at this mass of merchandise, and over in one corner just a little nativity scene. One said to the other, "Well, what do you know about that? Even the church is trying to horn in on Christmas."

See, I'm not sure adults quite get it. Children, maybe a little better. There's a Family Circus cartoon. Seven year old child holding her baby brother on her lap, telling him what Christmas is, said, "Jesus was born just in time for Christmas, up at the North Pole, surrounded by tiny reindeer and the Virgin Mary. Then Santa Claus showed up with lots of toys and stuff, and some swaddling clothes, and three wise men and elves all sung Christmas carols while the little drummer boy and Scrooge helped Joseph decorate the tree. In the meantime, Frosty the Snowman saw the star."

This morning I'd like to spend a little time having us think about Christmas. Next Sunday, we will have some time, our adult choir will do a cantata, in the sanctuary, 9:15 and 10:45, written by a contemporary poser, Zion Park, who is a member of our choir, so by the end of the morning next Sunday, we will understand a little more about music, and maybe this morning, as we take a look at Christmas, we will have a better idea about that.

I want to introduce to you three words. The first word, from John the Baptist, he spoke it, he said, "Repent." That's turn around. "You are a brood of vipers", a bunch of snakes. Hard words, but appropriate. Did you see that crowd the Friday after Thanksgiving? I think it was in Minnesota, and the guy who fell as the doors opened in the store, fell and thought he was going to be trampled to death. Brood of vipers. Someone was telling us about Christmas shoppers a number of years ago. Remember Cabbage Patch kids, when they were popular. Around Christmas time there weren't many of them, so this Target store somewhere in the Midwest had this deal where they had a hundred of them, and they were going to drop them off a helicopter onto a parking lot. The parents are below, the helicopter is up there, and all hundred of them were thrown out at the same time. It was a wonderful event, except for the fact that the helicopter blades sucked up the cabbage patch dolls into the blades and emulsified them, and where they were hoping to receive toys, what they ended up with was body parts. It was a Christmas shopping day not to be forgotten. Repent, turn around, look what you've become.

The house where we live is on a quiet street called Pepperwood Lane. Our particular house is unpretentious. You could drive by it and not see it. The street is loaded with Methodists. Now, Methodists, if you don't know, are not particularly rowdy people, except there's a lot of taunting that goes on in this neighborhood around Christmas lights. I mean, you've got Betsy Kellogg next door, you've got Harold and Ruby down the way, you've got the Quinns and then the Hittells are around the corner. Quinn was up on his ladder last week, trash-talking me while I'm hanging onto the gutter trying to clip on some lights. Decided I needed more, so I bought two more boxes. They were on sale. That didn't quite reach, and so I went out and bought a spool. My theory is, get them up, turn them on when it's dark, it doesn't matter. Yellow lights, blue lights, white lights, I LED's the whole front of the house. But the problem is, we've got five of these trees in the front of the house, so what do you do? It didn't quite cover, so I decided I would go to a simple motif. I stretched them as far as they would go in the dark. They look like abstract art. In fact there's one way you can look at it, it says CSU. There's another way you can look at it, it says UMC. Now, that's either Marines or Methodists. My wife Kathy took a look, and she did a John the Baptist on me, she walked me out into the street and looked at me and said, "Repent. Turn around and see what you have done." Well, the lights on the gutter were crooked, like a mouth full of teeth in need of orthodontia. And the lights on the front of the trees looked like the installer lacked sobriety. And the neighbors are mostly church members, and we're in the middle of a finance campaign, and so I repented. I climbed that ladder again, I turned around. You drive by our house tonight and you will see straight lights on the gutter and one pine tree that's especially proud.

Bob Kaylor is a United Methodist pastor in our conference, and in his book *Come to the Manger* he recalls, "I asked an older mentor clergy colleague if he had any advice for me, and he said 'Yes, Bob, just remember there's only one Messiah, and you ain't him.'" There's only one Messiah, he's our example, we follow him. He was a servant, not a ruler, and Orin Arnold understood this, and he's given us Christmas gifts, a list, what we should give, good advice. To your enemy, forgiveness. To your opponent, tolerance. To your friend, your heart. To a customer, your service. To all people, charity. To every child, a good example, and to yourself, respect. When shopping becomes a contact sport, or Christmas lights become a show or a joke, or when Christmas becomes an imposition, and we are apt to snap, when we need a drink and it isn't water, when we act like Scrooge looking for ghosts, or we become Herod the Great and we're not so great, or we're not wise men, we become fools, not wise women, we become something that resembles vipers, then refrain. Don't do it. Repent. Turn around, and look at what we've become.

A second word from the Apostle Paul, relax. Paul wrote, "Welcome each other as Christ welcomed you. And if you are strong, help those who aren't. Work to the glory of God." Relax. I debated a long time if I should say something about the error in the bulletin today. It could be no one would notice, and it would be best if nothing were said. The people in the office are great. They're competent, they're helpful, they will do anything for us, just to make it easy for us. My only criticism I have is that they are perfectionists, and this time of year they get a little cranky because there's so much to do and they want to get it all right. Do you know that the Christmas Eve bulletins are due this week? The

first week in December? And the Christmas letter was due last week, and the newsletter article for January is due next week? For January! I have to turn in the bulletin material on Tuesday before the sermon is even formulated exactly, and you know why? Because they want to check it and recheck it, and obsess over it. Well, this week in this bulletin on Thursday, I'm the one who saw it, and I almost didn't say it, but today we have a children's sermon, not a children's sermon. And the office staff who work to the glory of God relaxed. One of the healthiest things I've seen them do, not uptight, they let it stand, good for them.

Paul reminds us, you won't get everything right, you do what you can, the best you can do. Howard Eddington wrote a book entitled *Joseph, the Forgotten Man at Christmas*. He said, "Here he was, just an ordinary working man suddenly caught up in a swirling confluence of events and circumstances that apart from God might have destroyed him, and yet with God Joseph's faith, his courage, his compassion, his obedience, his strength sustained him. Surely we must see him not as a bit player but as one of God's stars in the unfolding drama of Christmas." It think all of us would agree. If we add it up we begin to realize that Jesus, when he wanted to refer to God, did not use the usual terms, like Almighty, All-Powerful, Omnipotent, God of all Gods, Lord of all Lords. Jesus just called God, "Father." He thought of his father, Joseph. A non-anxious presence. A hero in the sense that Tom Brokaw defined it. "Heroes are people that rise to the occasion, and then slip quietly away." The word is "relax." Repent, relax.

A final word from Jesus: Recharge. I have made mistakes in my life. I have made blunders in ministry. Like the year I referred to the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes as looking like a burrito. That didn't go over too well. And last Sunday, in the 8:00 service, when I announced that we would sing verses 1 through 7 of a particular hymn that had only two verses, that wasn't good. But I think the big idea I was most off base about, and I've been wrong about this in six churches, including this one, I had been opposed to having communion on Christmas eve. I opposed it. Just never saw the need of it, because it never seemed relevant. See, I've seen the birth of a baby. I've seen the pain someone goes through. It's a little like kidney stones. I've seen the screaming and the breathing and the LaMaze-ing and the coaching. I just can't imagine, historically, that after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary found some bread and broke it and poured themselves two beakers of wine, let alone a thimble full of grape juice. Every church inflicted upon by my being appointed to it has defeated my objection, including this one, because they know I was wrong. Because the most important word, if Christmas is going to be anything much more than full-contact shopping, or being busy with no purpose, Christmas must be a time to recharge, and that's the reason for communion. If God is incarnated in Jesus, which we believe that he is, and we take the bread and the cup, and Jesus is in us, and we are the body of Christ, in the body of Christ we are recharged.

Helen Mallencourt was reflecting on the word "Yahweh." The word "Yahweh" is the Hebrew word that means God. It's one of the Hebrew words for God. It means "I am." She writes, "God says, 'My name is I Am.'" When you live in the past, with its mistakes and regrets, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not I Was. I am not there. When you live in the future, with its problems and its fears, it is hard. I'm not there either. I am not 'I

will be.' But when you live in the moment, it is not hard, because that is where I am." Communion on Christmas eve? You bet. Not in Julesburg, either. Right here. 4:00 through 8:30, in the chapel, and 11:00 here in the sanctuary, on Christmas Eve. So we meet him at the table, like we're meeting him today, so we can live with God in the moment, because God is 'I am.' So we can recharge ourselves in the knowledge that we are somebody.

Charles Schultz had a Peanuts cartoon that is profoundly true. Charlie Brown is reading the Christmas story to his little sister. "And in those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled." Charlie pauses. "Marcie, Caesar Augustus was the emperor of Rome, the most powerful person on earth, and one night in the little town of Bethlehem, a child was born. No one paid any attention. After all, he was born in a common stable. Who would have thought that that child would someday be revered by millions, while Caesar Augustus would be almost completely forgotten?" Marcie interrupted him, saying, "No one paid any attention when I was born, either, and now I'm loved by everyone. And I'm going to get so many presents for Christmas, it's going to make your head swim." And Charlie Brown turns to leave, closes his Bible. Marcie says, "Aren't you going to finish the story?" Charlie Brown replies, "I think you already finished it."

William Temple wrote, "We cannot too often insist upon the point that the center of Christian faith is not an intellectual proposition, but a person. And for us, that person meets us at the table, and when we gather, in the enormity of that, it makes a difference, because we are reminded of all the other people who have been with us on other occasions, and we are empowered by that. Because we get in touch with the fact that here's a person who gave everything he had, so that the faith communicated would come down to us." And that touches us deeply, and we are recharged by that. Because we have come to understand that resurrection is not just a one-time resuscitation, but a revolution in the human spirit that defeats death and sin and despair and boredom, and you are recharged by that, empowered by that, and awakened by that, to know everybody loves you, God loves you, and to be able to save a life, bring it, send it, we can take it and we'll make it recharged like the volt, plugged in, propped up, ready. Three words. Repent, relax, recharge. Let us pray.

This morning we light the candle of hope, take a look at life, see it for what it is. Take count of our own lives. We add it up. We find it good. There is hope for us and our world, and we meet at the table. Oh, God, we remember how he said, "This is my body, broken for you," and how he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Take this, and be thankful." Help us to recharge ourselves, as we seek to transform your world. Amen.