

“Why We Need Jesus: For Our Own Redemption” The Rev. Christine Chakoian
 Luke 3:1-18
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 The 3rd Sunday in Advent

First Presbyterian Church
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Introduction to Scripture

In this brief Advent series, as we prepare for the birth of Christ, we are exploring, if you will, the most obvious “reason for the season”: our need for Jesus. By this I mean not only the baby Jesus, but also the Savior that this baby turned out to be. “With a baby at Christmas, it’s very easy for [our] perspective to shrink to the size of the crib,” says the wise old professor Fred Craddock. Instead we are invited to look up and “see the cosmic proportions of [our] *God* who comes to us.” Our first Sunday we explored this cosmic Christ, the victorious, Christ, to whom we lift our eyes to see our world’s needed salvation. Last week we addressed our need for the incarnate Lord, who descends to us, comes near to us, to meet us in our brokenness and sorrow. Today, on this third Sunday of Advent, we look to our need for Jesus our Redeemer, who comes to bring us freedom from our sin. Listen now to the Word of God as it comes to us from Luke 3:1-18. ...

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This week before Christmas, I can think of no better way to welcome the Christ-child than to welcome three new babies into our midst. They are so beautiful, so sweet, so innocent. (Even the ones who cry!) And we cannot help but thinking of the baby Jesus, lying in a manger, utterly gentle and pure.

We all start out this way, of course. Anyone who has held a newborn baby in your arms knows the miracle of it: the tiny, perfect body, the impossibly miniature fingers and toes, the astonishing newness and freshness and purity. We all start out utterly without corruption, no matter what St. Augustine said about original sin. There is not a newborn who sinned in the lot of us.

But something happens along the way. Very early in our life, even as tiny toddlers, we start learning right from wrong; and very early in life, as soon as we learn it, we start protecting ourselves from the consequences of our own actions. “Did you throw the ball and break the lamp?” is rarely met with a whole-hearted, “Why, yes, Mommy!” And “did you hit your sister” is soon answered by “She started it.” It is not a habit that we easily break; perhaps, indeed, it is more than a habit. Maybe there is something to original sin after all. Perhaps it is hard-wired into us in the interest of self-preservation. I wouldn’t want to mess with my father, any more than Adam and Eve were eager to say to the Lord, “Why, yes, of course we ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, even though it is the one thing – the *only* thing -- you told us not to do.”

It is no accident that the tree that they ate of was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for that knowledge is the end of innocence itself. Once you know the difference between right and wrong, there is no turning back. From that moment on you have to think about what you’re doing. And then you have to think about how to cover the bad choices that you inevitably make. For, sadly, knowing what is right does always impel us to do it: “Wretched man that I am,” St. Paul himself exclaimed. “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:19, 24). It is part of our human condition.

And as long as our bad choices continue, so also our covering continues. In grade school, the dog ate our homework. In high school, we were out with the guys, and one of them had the beer in the car; we forgot about the assignment; we weren’t deliberately mean to our friend, we just didn’t get around to RSVPing to her party. At first we make these excuses because we are afraid of the wrath of our parents, or our teachers, or our friends. Eventually, we make them because we don’t like to think of ourselves as lazy, irresponsible, stupid, or mean. It is our own judgment as much as the judgment of others that we fear. And that’s when things

go from bad to worse: when we stop really seeing right from wrong, and we do not know the difference anymore.

I think I first noticed it with my little white lies. I am embarrassed to say I was well into my ministry when I began to examine my behavior. It had started innocently enough (at least it seemed that way): I simply didn't want to hurt people's feelings. If I couldn't attend someone's dinner party, I thought it was polite to make an excuse, so I always gave a wee word of explanation – we already have plans that night, or whatever. But if the truth was that I was just peopled-out, or I really didn't want to hang with them, I still made up an excuse, and often with more detail than was necessarily true. I also covered myself – in the name of kindness - with phone calls or e-mails not returned. “I didn't get your message” sounded kinder than “I was too busy to pay attention to you.” I know I'm not alone in this. My twin sister quips that somewhere along the line telling someone you were praying for them seemed as good as praying for them.

Little white lies became so easy that they became a habit. It never progressed to big lies – I assure you, I really did get my degree at Yale; I really have never cheated on my husband – but the white lies began to be so easy. And what happened next was this: I stopped thinking of them as lies. “Truthiness,” to use Stephen Colbert's famous word, grew to be close enough. And when that happened, I stopped seeing the difference between right and wrong.

That is a major problem. And, I suspect, it is ubiquitous. It was the downfall of President Clinton: “I did not have sex with that woman.” It looks likely to have been at work in the lead-up to our current war. It is behind the backdating of stock options, the plagiarism of term papers, the excuses we make to ourselves about our overeating or drinking or spending. Granted, there are plenty of gray areas. It's important that we “do nuance.” But in so many places in our culture today – no, let me make it personal – in so many places in *our* lives today – we no longer see the

difference between right and wrong. We no longer see much of anything as virtue, or as sin.

There are some fabulous lines in T.S. Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party*, when the character Celia Coplestone announces:

"I've never noticed that immorality
Was accompanied by a sense of sin:
At least, I have never come across it."

It is much easier, more gentle on ourselves, and perhaps more modern, not to think in categories of sin at all. Coplestone goes on to explain:

"I had always been taught to disbelieve in sin.
Oh, I don't mean that it was never mentioned!
But anything wrong, from our point of view,
Was either bad form, or was psychological"

(cited by Patrick D. Miller, Princeton Theological Seminary, in "Preaching Repentance in a Narcissistic Age," *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 1998, p. 4).

This is not the word that John the Baptist was given in the wilderness when he said,

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to ourselves, '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 ax 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" (Luke 3:7-9)

After which, the gospel says, "with many other exhortations John proclaimed the good news to the people" (Luke 3:18).

Beloved in Christ, this is good news indeed. God has greater desires for us than "truthiness" ... God has greater expectations of us than good form ... God has

greater hopes for us even than psychological well-being. God wants us to see right and wrong again. It is not that hard. God wants us to share with those who have so little, when we have so very much. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none,” John says to his peasant audience (Luke 3:10), and to us who have sometimes two or three houses, we must share what we have to make sure that nobody is homeless, especially innocent children. God wants us to make a living and earn our share, but not at the expense of others. “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you,” John says to the tax collectors (Luke 3:13); and to us who have abundant incomes, we must insure that each person has a living wage, or at very least a safety net beneath them. God wants us to use our power appropriately, and not take advantage of our position. “Do not extort through threats or false accusation,” John says to the soldiers (Luke 3:14); and to us who have great influence in politics and investments and board memberships, we must take care to speak the truth, and act honorably, and use our power for the common good.

This is not a self-help project. If we could will ourselves to goodness, Lord knows that we would. But by the power of God, we can. Let me close with a story of repentance and how it is possible for each of us to change.

There is a woman I know, a dear friend of mine, who was caught in the grips of alcoholism -- which I dare say is not sin itself but is disease, psychological, physical and biological as well. But it is also an evil thing that it does to people who succumb to it and to those all around them. She had come to the end of her rope. She knew what she wanted to do and she knew that she could not do it on her own. So she just gave up; she stopped hoping and praying. One day she just decided, “I’m done with it. I’m done with expecting things to be different than the way things have always been.” And she kept on in her drinking.

And then, somewhere along the line, something in herself or outside herself got through to her again and she turned again, turned again deep in prayer. And this time, her prayer was different. She was utterly humbled. She threw herself on the floor and begged God to take away the burden she had borne in anguish all these years. She gave herself over, as the twelve step programs say, “to the Higher Power.” And in that moment, her burden was lifted. She felt a warmth throughout her entire self. And she knew that she would never be the same again. And the most remarkable thing is this: she now says that if she had not had the burden of alcoholism to bear, she would not have come deeply to know how God hears and delivers us.

We may not have the burden of alcoholism but we, all of us, do bear a burden of secret things. Of things that we would rather not admit to ourselves; of habits we have gotten into that are deeply hard to stop; of ways of being with our loved ones that are mean and sometimes cruel; ways of being selfish; ways we know are wrong and we may have tried to change. We may really have!

But I swear to you this is true. That Jesus came into the world to give us new life -- to take us and raise us from whatever burden we have and to bring us to new life again. We can change. We can repent. We can be new again — one at a time, bit by bit. I swear this is true: that God will change this world again and make it new. For God has indeed so loved this world, that he gave his only Son, so that we who trust in him are not destined to perish in our sinfulness but can have life again. We can change, by the grace of God ... we can change, even now. Amen.