

“What Should We Do?”

“Prepare The Way” Advent 2018 – part #3

Luke 3:7-18

Do you love to throw stones at the beach? I do. I love Antrim Creek Natural Area; it’s the best place around here to find skipping stones and skim them across Lake Michigan. My family likes to collect stones from places we’ve traveled. I have a stone from Palmer, Alaska, where we took a white-water rafting trip this summer. We have a lot of cool stones from beaches, rivers, mountains.

Besides collecting, what can you do with stones? Obviously, you can throw them. You can even break things with them. You can build things out of stones, like walls, foundations, and landscaping. You can use a stone as a paperweight. Here’s an unusual idea: put a stone in the toilet tank to save water when flushing.

You can even have a pet rock. They are great Christmas gifts. You don’t need to worry that they’ll make a mess of the house or pee on the carpet. You don’t have to buy them food. Get a pet rock, tell it to sit and stay, and it does.

Of all the many uses of stones, there is one thing that stones cannot do: react. Ask a stone for a hug...you won’t get one. Ask a stone to share lunch with you...it won’t happen. Ask a stone to say something nice. You will be waiting a long time.

The trouble in our world today is some people have forgotten that they are not stones. We all know that we can act in cold, hard, and uncaring ways. It is especially hard, I think, during this season of the year. There are so many people asking for our help, it can be overwhelming. We can be tempted to be stony.

At Christmas time, people look for things like love, kindness, hope, and generosity. We search for these things year-round. Just this week we had four people come into the church office on the same day asking for help with food. Because of our discretionary fund and our preparation, we were able to give all of them food bags. In Jesus' words, we gave them bread, not stones. (Matt 7:9)

My question for you all this morning is this: What motivates a person to respond with kindness and joy and not be stone-faced? If we know the world is looking for love, joy, peace, and hope, how do we give that away? What would it take for us to change our world so that we all responded generously, to every person, every time, instead of being stone-cold?

One thing that is necessary for us to change is to have a teacher – someone who is willing to answer tough questions. In fact, we need more than a teacher. We need a prophet – someone who is willing to proclaim the truth, even if it hurts. When teachers and prophets speak, we need to be willing to listen, ask questions, and finally, act on the truth we hear.

Many people were coming to the desert to hear John the Baptizer. They thought, perhaps, as descendants of Abraham, they didn't have to do anything special, just continue to rely their heritage. But John warned them, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.” (Luke 3:8) John indicated that without fruit - works of repentance – the Israelites were no better off than the stones on the road, which, if God wanted, could replace them.

That seems kind of harsh. Would God replace all the Christians in our churches with rocks? Possibly. What we need to understand is there is nothing

that angers God more than when the poor and oppressed are mistreated. John knew this, which is why he preached his message of repentance, forgiveness, and baptism. The truth is, people are hungry for this message. I don't know about you, but I crave messages that matter, messages that require me to change. I don't want God to replace me with a rock! I want to ask the question that we all should ask: “What should we do?”

John was not sent into the desert to entertain. He warned the people that it was possible “to flee from the coming wrath.” Remember, a prophet's job is to tell the truth. If God is judging us, then we need to hear it. This is actually good news! Why? If God is a righteous judge, than God can also forgive. John knew if the people would take his message to heart and respond to God's second chance, not only would they be forgiven, they would change the world.

“What should we do?” (Luke 3:10) This is just another way to ask my favorite question, “So what?” So what, John? The Messiah is coming. We want to be ready, not stony. What should we do?

John shared three specific actions that the people should take. First, they should be generous. If you have two shirts, give one to someone who has none, and if you have food, share it with someone who has none. (Luke 3:11) God cares for the poor; we should too. It's as simple as that.

John also answered the questions of the tax collectors and Roman soldiers, which might have surprised his audience. These people were traitors and foreigners, not “descendants of Abraham.” But they also listened to John, repented, and asked what they should do. John told them: Be honest, don't be greedy, don't cheat or lie. Do your job, and be content with what you have. (Luke

3:13-14) That’s a great message no matter if you work for IRS or not. Be content with what you have, and you will find it much easier to give to others.

This advice from John should sound familiar. In Micah 6:8, God tells us what we should do, and John would have known this passage. “What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

This is the truth about how God wants to live our lives. But even after hearing this truth, many of us still act like stones: unresponsive, unmoved. We say, “Yup, that’s right, that’s what God wants for our lives,” but we fail to take action. We just think, “Well, I attend church on Sundays, so that should be enough.”

It is never enough to hear the message and not act. The apostle James spells this out clearly in his letter.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. (James 2:14-16)

What James, Micah, Luke, and John tell us is common sense, really. This is what we should do to prepare for the coming for Christ. Share. Give. Take care of the poor. Be content with our possessions. Don’t cheat, don’t extort, don’t accuse, don’t lie. This all seems very reasonable, don’t you think?

However, John said this more than once. Luke says that “with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.” (Luke 3:18) Many words. Many messages. Many sermons. John constantly reminded the people, “This is what God calls us to do. Jesus is coming.”

Christmas is full of repetitive traditions. We sing the same songs, tell the same story we tell every year: “Jesus was born to save us.” Why bother repeating it? I’ll tell you why: we all need to hear this message more than once. The gospel can never be repeated too often. God loves us. Our sin separates us from God. God made a way back to him in Jesus Christ. Christ died once, for all, while we were yet sinners. Everyone who has the Son has eternal life. Repent and believe the good news! This is a message that will never change or grow old, and it must often be repeated often, because you never know who will hear it for the first time. Maybe you did, today, just now.

But our bad habits get in the way of the gospel being proclaimed and acted out. The world too often just sees the church as a place of rules, a place where stones are thrown, where walls are erected to keep people out. However, if we listen to the words of the prophets and produce fruits of repentance, acts of mercy and charity, we will have a much different reputation.

So here’s the thing: Doing good deeds for the sake of doing good deeds usually does not provide lasting motivation. There must be another reason.

This is the absolute truth – write this down. We are to perform acts of mercy, charity and kindness out of gratitude for the grace God has shown to us. Church, there is nothing you can do to earn your salvation. There is nothing you can do to remove your sin on your own. There is nothing you can do to make God love you more or less. Salvation is a gift, plain and simple. And what do you

parents teach you, when you get a gift on Christmas? To say thank you.

“Salvation is a gift of God that transforms our very nature; thus, living out our baptized nature results in our doing good works. Our doing happens as a response to what God has first done to, in, and through us.” *Rev. Dr. Irving Cotto, umcdiscipleship.org.*

Our acts of charity are how we say thank you to God and show that we mean it. When we serve others, it shows that we have the joy of Jesus Christ inside of us.

Today is known as Joy Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent. Our Advent Candle reading was taken from Philippians – a book of joy written from inside a prison. It doesn't matter where you are or what is happening to you. If you are a Christian who knows the saving grace of Jesus, you are meant to be person of joy who serves others.

Grace is a strange conundrum. God doesn't need us to praise him. On Palm Sunday, Jesus even said if his disciples were quiet, the very stones would cry out in joy. (Luke 19:40) No, this is the meaning of grace – God doesn't need us, but God definitely wants us. So if we understand how good it is that God sent the Savior into the world, then we can't help but respond with joy and serve others.

That's the difference between us and stones. A stones really can't shout, can't sing, can't pray, can't serve, can't share, can't invite, can't give their witness. But we can.

1st Peter 2:5 says it best: “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” That's what we should do. Offer acceptable, spiritual sacrifices that make the world sit up and notice how good God is.

There was never an easier time to stop throwing stones and start throwing grace than Christmas time. I saw some severe stone throwing at the post office this week by a gentleman who could do nothing but complain. We all know this is a busy time of year, yet, when it seems like everyone is saying, “Merry Christmas,” all this man could do was tell the poor woman behind the counter what she and the US government were doing wrong. He was inconvenienced, and it was somebody’s fault, so he took aim at the nearest target. I watched this abuse for a few minutes, while she bravely tried to laugh it off. Finally, when he asked, “Why do I have to come here every four times a week to get a single package?” I jumped in. I said something corny like, “Because this beautiful woman enjoys having people admire her.” When the man left, the woman told me, “Thank you.” She noticed that grace had been offered.

If you are going to get a rock, make it a prayer rock. If you’re going to be a stone, at least be a living stone, not cold, hard, unresponsive one.

The Third Sunday in Advent may be “Joy” Sunday, but for the Christian, every day is “Joy” day, because every day is a new day to marvel at the grace extended to us, and show, by the works of justice, mercy, and charity, how we intend to make the most of the second chance God has given us. That’s what we should do.

Memory Verse: Philippians 4:4 (NIV)

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Who responds to John’s message? Do any of them surprise you? What is God doing in John’s ministry and message? What are we called to do?
2. In light of John’s message, how do you think he would answer the question, “How should we live?” How is this similar or dissimilar to how Jesus would answer the question?
3. How is what we “do” related to what God has done and/or is doing?
4. How does your baptism (and living a life of repentance) impact how you do life?
5. What is God doing around us this Advent? What is God calling us to do this Advent season?

Source: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/advent-christmas-epiphany-2018-19-worship-planning-series/december-16-third-sunday-of-advent-year-c/third-sunday-of-advent-2018-year-c-faith-formation>