



# Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

## **“Back to Basics”**

Rev. David K. Groth

*“And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’” (Luke 3:10)*

December 9, 2012

### **Collect of the Day**

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Mason Crosby, as most of you know, has been in the worse slump of his career. In fact, the kicker for the Green Bay Packers is hitting just 62% of his field goals, which is second last in the NFL. That's not good . . . but it has added a layer of interest to the game, with all Wisconsin holding its breath whenever he trots out onto the field.

What is a kicker to do when he has a case of the yips? Some kickers go to their "happy place." That is, they keep a compilation of great and game winning kicks on film, and they watch them over and over to get their confidence back. Other kickers hire a kicking coach and try to rebuild their swing from the ground up. Most, however, say you just have to work through it. Don't scrutinize every little thing. Don't try to remember too many swing keys. Just go back to the basics. The kicker for the New York Giants says when he's in a slump he "doesn't pay close attention to form or technique. . . Some guys tend to overanalyze things" he says, "and I think that's when you get in trouble. . . I try to keep it simple" he said.

In our text, I think John the Baptist is essentially saying the same to us: get back to the basics.

God is preparing us meet his Son, and he's using this remarkable prophet. John is not sophisticated nor polished nor does he care one little bit what others think of him. . . but he is faithful, and all that makes him just right for the work God has for him.

This day John is letting his audience have it, and a full dose too, calling them a brood of vipers and going on about God's coming judgment. He's preaching

repentance, that all should turn from sin and seek the Lord's forgiveness. So probably no one is more surprised than John when it becomes clear his message is actually hitting home. The people are distraught. They're asking, "What then should we do?" First the crowd as a whole asks the question, and then the tax collectors ask the same question. And then even the Roman soldiers, (no doubt sent there to keep an eye on John and to maintain order), even they momentarily forget who they are and what they're supposed to be about, and they ask John, "What about us. What should we do?"

Now think of this from John's perspective. He finally has them where he wants them. For once, for once, they're not sending or receiving text messages or dozing off or making faces at the baby in the row ahead of them. They actually want to know more; they want him to say more. They want to know what they should do next. John can say anything at this point, and they will at least hear him out. So when they ask, "What should we do?" you might have expected him to say: "Sign up and become a part of a new sect I'm organizing" or "come out to our desert monastery and live a life of austerity away from the temptations of the world." Or "Join my guerilla movement and be ready to lay down your life." Or perhaps, "send in a check to keep this important ministry going."

It's a surprise, then, perhaps even a letdown, when, in response to their question, "What shall we do?" he says nothing that's new or surprising. "If you have enough food and clothing, share some with those who do not; and if you're a tax collector, don't cheat; and if you're a soldier, don't take advantage of your authority and be content with your pay."

John had opportunity to propose radical change. Instead, he hands out a few ordinary bits of bland, ethical advice, nothing they hadn't already heard long before. "Share what you have. Don't cheat. Be content." He sends them back to the basics.

Our assumption, even today, is that repentance and conversion is or ought to be dramatic. Our assumption is it should be followed by large scale resolutions and changes. We half expect John to tell these tax collectors to quit being tax collectors and go to the seminary instead. We half expect John to tell these soldiers to become warriors for Jesus instead of Caesar. Repentance ought to be dramatic . . . at least interesting. We also entertain the suspicion that the fanatics, the zealots, the wild-eyed religious crazies, the ones who are always talking as if they are carrying God around in their hip pockets . . . we sometimes suspect they are the only true believers. The rest of us are just faking it to one degree or another. But as far as John is concerned, that's not the way it is at all.

How do you prepare for the Lord's return? John's answer is all so ordinary. Stop doing wrong. Start doing right. No need to overanalyze things. Just go back to the basics. Instead of hoarding share with those who are poor. To the tax collectors, the white collar professionals of the day, even though it's easy and expected and common and overlooked – don't cheat. To the soldiers, the public authority in that place – don't misuse your authority, and be content with your pay.”

John didn't say anything new, which is, by the way, the mark of a faithful preacher. If it's brand new, it's probably wrong. If it's brand new, it's probably the wisdom of man rather than the wisdom of God that is being proclaimed. But John wasn't saying anything new. He was lifting his material straight out of the Old Testament. For example, from Micah chapter 6, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”(v. 8). John has nothing new for us. Maybe that's why Jesus once said, “Among those born of women none is greater than John.”

And please note, John's focus is on public

behavior. The response to God's grace is not just a private piety, not just something that goes on in your own home or at church. And it's not just something that's between you and Jesus. It's between you and your co-workers. It's between you and the people of this community. It's between you and family and friends. "Share what you have with the poor. Don't take advantage of others. Don't misuse your authority." It's all public behavior. So is our mission: "Every day, everywhere, by everyone . . . sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd."

And notice, John isn't telling anyone to give up their vocations. He's telling them to do the right thing within the vocations they already have. Be a tax collector, but don't cheat. Be a soldier (there's nothing wrong with that!); just don't misuse your authority. Be a cop, but don't be "badge heavy" and start pushing people around. Be a plumber, and be the best plumber you can possibly be to the glory of God. Be a roofer, but you don't have to cuss and swear up there like those other knuckleheads. Be a politician, but serve the public's interests and not your own. Be a manager, but show them what a servant looks like rather than a slave master.

It's all so ordinary and old, isn't it, but is it easy? Is it simple? Sometimes not. Sometimes religious people like you and me have more than a little trouble with basic things like kindness and patience and integrity. Sometimes you and I have more than a little trouble with basic commandments against lying, slandering, coveting, insisting on having things our own way . . . more than a little trouble with compassion and forgiveness.

So what should *you* do to prepare for the coming of Christ? What should you do to prepare for his final judgment of your soul? You already know: integrity, as defined by doing the right thing even when no one else will know whether you did it or not. Compassion defined by a relationship with an elderly neighbor who

needs your help. Justice defined by casting your ballot on some basis other than your own self-interest. Loyalty defined by staying with a relationship through difficult and unsatisfying times. Discipline defined by regularly hearing God's Word and receiving his Sacrament, and not just when it's convenient or when you feel like it. Self-control defined by not lashing out with your tongue or drinking excessively. There's nothing new here. You already know what you need to do to prepare for the Lord's coming. Now do it, says John.

And as you begin, and fail, and begin again, remember there is one who lived under the Law without fault, without sin. John would soon point this One out to the crowds and say, "Behold! Here's the one we've been waiting for the centuries. Here's the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." He takes them away, as if they didn't belong to you, but to him. He takes them, as if they are not your responsibility but his. He takes them away, as if they were precious to him and not repulsive. He takes them away and smothers them in his death.

Having been saved by forgiveness and grace, now what? "Now what should we do?" "Live it out" is the answer still. Live out the old, ordinariness of the Christian life. That's where it's at, slugging it out day after day, trying to be as good as we can be at what we do to the glory of God. Trying to use what we have responsibly. Trying to be honest and kind and just and fair and patient and generous and forgiving. Trying to live as he lived, not to save our own skins on the Last Day but in the spirit of gratitude and praise because he's already done that. The death he has already been died. The waters of Baptism he has already poured over your head. The faith he has already enkindled in your heart.

By the way, when Mason Crosby was interviewed about his kicking a couple of weeks ago, he got a little defensive as might be expected. It must be hard when you're shanking kicks left and right to then go inside and face a bank of cameras and bright lights and microphones. In any event, he was wearing a Nike shirt, with

the old slogan: “Just do it.” All of Wisconsin is hoping he’ll live that out on the field. But it seems that same expectation has been placed on us too.

“What shall we do?” they asked John. “Live it out” is the answer still. Go back to the basics and live out the Christian life knowing your Savior loves you no matter what, but also has the highest expectations of you. Amen.

**GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH**

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