Sunday, December 11, 1994
REPENT (NO. 2 IN A SERIES: VERBS FOR ADVENT)
Luke 3:7-18

This season is not always a happy time for everyone. There are people who approach Christmas with apprehension rather than anticipation; with fears instead of joy. For some, it is a sad and lonely season. More people are depressed at this time of year than at any other. Family quarrels increase. There's too much drinking, too little sleep, frayed nerves, and exhausting schedules. All these combine to take away the joy that is supposed to be present during this season.

Some people are sad because the holidays remind them of all the people who are no longer with them — parents who have died, children who have moved away, lost friends, and people far away whom they may never see again. There is also sadness because of our own lost better selves.

Preparations for the holiday are stressful for many and, for some, so expensive that usually joyful people are sometimes reduced to muttering cranks.

For some adults, there is the reality that Christmas can never be the same as it was for them as children. The mystery and the magic are gone. There is a lot of regretting at this time of year.

Some parents attempt to recapture the old feelings by spending large amounts of money on their children's gifts. Sometimes this works for a time, but then it fades quickly.

Money can also get involved in one's estimate of others. We want to show our love for friends and relatives by giving them gifts, and many gifts require a decision about cost. Even though we like to repeat the cliché, "It's the thought that counts," the price of a gift has a tendency to intrude into our thoughts, both in our giving and receiving.

There is also the unbearable melancholy that afflicts some people during this season. This is rooted partly in the misguided notion that everybody is hysterically happy as Christmas approaches, and by comparison, we don't feel as happy and we wonder why. Is there something wrong with us?

Maybe we misinterpret the Christmas message. The story of this season does not imply that life has no problems, that there is no evil in the world. I know of someone who sent out a Christmas card with a quote from St. Augustine, a quote that found the pattern of the cross in the nailed wooden slats of the infant's crib. Some people told her it was in poor taste since it suggested suffering during the season of Christmas.

But there is nothing in the Christmas narrative to suggest we can turn the manger into a Disneyland scene. The Gospel of Matthew tells us about a young couple who had to flee to Egypt soon after the baby was born, and of all the little boy babies being killed in the region of Bethlehem.

Advent prepares us for the story of a baby who was the Savior of the world, yet who as a young man was crucified. It is also the story of that same individual being resurrected — meaning that God's love for all of us can never be killed or done away with in any manner.

God's love, which became a human being in Jesus at Bethlehem, can never be extinguished, even though there are those who continue to try.

What then are some of the ways we can prepare ourselves so that this love of God, born in the flesh in Jesus, can continue to be received by us and at the same time flow through us to others?

Last week, in the first sermon in this series, we considered the verb, "comfort." "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." Not only does the Christmas event bring us God's comfort, but we are to bring comfort to others, especially during this season.

The second verb for Advent is "repent." That may sound a bit odd to you at first hearing, but it was the message that John the Baptist brought to the people of his time as he called on them to prepare for the coming of God's love in a human being. To repent means to turn your life around, to start fresh and to leave the old sins and bad habits behind. It means to live fully in the present.

John the Baptist followed his call for repentance by saying, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." In other words, do something positive and good. When some people in the crowd asked him, "What then should we do?" When they asked for specifics, he did not tell them that if they wanted to be ready to receive God's love they should move to Jerusalem where the temple was located, nor did he encourage them to move into the wilderness where he lived and go on a spiritual retreat. He did not tell them they should quit their jobs and spend more time in prayer.

In essence, he said, "If you truly want to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, if you want to experience God's love and have it flow through you, then you need to make the most of the present moment." He gave even more specific answers to several groups of people. "Whoever has two coats must give to someone who has none; and whoever has food must do the same." To the tax collectors, he said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." And to the Roman soldiers, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations, and be satisfied with your wages." To each of these groups, the message was the same: live honestly, honorably, and with integrity right now. The Messiah is coming, but you don't have to postpone your life until then. Live in the fullness of right now. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." Then you are ready to receive the Messiah.

Mother Teresa put it this way: "Spread love wherever you go; first of all in your own house. Give love to your children, to your wife or husband, to a next-door neighbor... Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness; kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile, kindness in your warm greeting." These are all fruits worthy of repentance.

Here's a specific example from Art Buchwald.

I was in New York the other day and rode with a friend in a taxi. When we got out, my friend said to the driver, "Thank you for the ride. You did a superb job of driving." The taxi driver was stunned for a second. Then he said, "Are you a wise guy or something?"

"No, my dear man, and I'm not putting you on. I admire the way you keep cool in heavy traffic." "Yeah," the driver said and drove off.

“What was that all about?” Buchwald asked his friend. “I’m trying to bring love back to New York,” his friend said. “I believe it’s the only thing that can save the city.” “How can one man save New York?” Buchwald asked his friend.

“It’s not one man,” his friend replied. “I believe I have made that taxi driver’s day. Suppose he has 20 fares. He’s going to be nice to those 20 fares because someone was nice to him. Those fares in turn will be kinder to their employees or shopkeepers or waiters or even their own families. Eventually, the goodwill could spread to at least 1,000 people. Now that isn’t bad, is it?”

“But,” Buchwald said, “You’re depending on that taxi driver to pass your goodwill on to others.”

“I’m not depending on it,” his friend said. “I’m aware that the system isn’t foolproof, so I might deal with ten different people today. If out of ten I can make three happy, then eventually I can indirectly influence the attitudes of 3,000 more.”

“It sounds good on paper,” Buchwald admitted, “But I’m not sure it works in practice.”

“Nothing is lost if it doesn’t. It didn’t take any of my time to tell that man he was doing a good job. He neither received a larger tip nor a smaller tip. If it fell on deaf ears, so what? Tomorrow there will be another taxi driver I can try to make happy.”

“You’re some kind of nut,” Buchwald said to his friend.

“That shows how cynical you have become,” his friend replied. “I have made a study of this. The thing that seems to be lacking, besides money of course, for our postal employees, is that no one tells people who work for the post office what a good job they’re doing.”

“But they’re not doing a good job.”

“They’re not doing a good job because they feel no one cares if they do or not. Why shouldn’t someone say a kind word to them?”

Buchwald and his friend were then walking past a structure in the process of being built and passed five workmen eating their lunch. His friend stopped. “That’s a magnificent job you men are doing. It must be difficult and dangerous work.”

The workmen eyed Buchwald’s friend suspiciously.

“When will it be finished,” his friend asked. “June,” one of the workmen grunted. “Ah, that really is impressive. You must all be very proud.”

As they walked away, Buchwald said to his friend, “I haven’t seen anyone like you since The Man from La Mancha.”

His friend said, “When those men digest my words, they will feel better for it. Somehow the city will benefit from their happiness.”

“But you can’t do this all alone,” Buchwald protested. “You’re only one person.”

His friend replied, “The most important thing is not to get discouraged. Making people in the city become kind again is not an easy job, but if I can enlist other people in my campaign, then it will help.”

I think John the Baptist would agree that spreading simple human kindness is bearing a fruit worthy of repentance. It’s a wonderful way to open yourself to God’s love, and it’s a splendid way to prepare for Christmas.

Here’s another story that makes the same point. A man named Paul received an automobile from his brother as a Christmas present. On Christmas Eve, when Paul came out of his office, a street urchin was walking around the shiny new car, admiring it. “Is this your car, Mister?” he asked.

Paul nodded. “My brother gave it to me for Christmas.” The young man was astounded. “You mean your brother gave it to you, and it didn’t cost you anything? Boy, I wish...” He hesitated.

Paul thought he knew what the young man was going to wish for. He was going to wish he had a brother like that. But what the young man said jarred Paul all the way down to his heels. “I wish,” the young man said, “that I could be a brother like that.”

Paul looked at the young man with surprise, then impulsively he asked, “Would you care to take a ride in my automobile?”

“Oh yes, I’d love that.” After a short ride, the young man turned and with his eyes aglow, said, “Mister, would you mind driving in front of my house?”

Paul smiled a little. He thought he knew what the young man wanted. He wanted to show his neighbors that he could ride home in a big car. But Paul was wrong again. “Will you stop where those two steps are?” he asked. He ran up the steps. Then, after a little while, Paul heard him coming back, but he was not coming fast. He was carrying his little crippled brother. He sat him down on the bottom step, then sort of squeezed up against him and pointed to the car.

“There she is, Buddy, just like I told you upstairs. His brother gave it to him for Christmas, and it didn’t cost him a cent. And someday I’m going to give you one just like it. Then you can see for yourself all the pretty things in the Christmas windows that I’ve been trying to tell you about.”

Paul got out of his new car and lifted the young crippled boy to the front seat of his car. The shining-eyed older brother climbed in beside him, and the three of them began a memorable holiday ride.

That Christmas, Paul learned what Jesus meant when he said, “It is more blessed to give.” Amen.