

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS: THE COSTLIEST CHRISTMAS

A Homily for Advent III, 2009

Appointed texts, for context:

I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD. Zephaniah 3

The LORD will indeed grant prosperity, and our land will yield its increase. Psalm 85:12

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:5-9

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "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 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 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." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. Luke 3:7-18

Let me summarize John's prophetic passage from Luke, in contemporary terms: There'll be accountability for the brood of vipers and their excessive greed; adequate abundance for everyone else, measured in terms of whatever is minimally

sufficient if we all share a little bit more than we have; and a winnowing fork that will imminently separate those who grasp the concept and act on it, from those who don't.

Such is the "good news" of John proclamation about what we're all supposed to eagerly anticipate. No wonder we can hardly wait for Christmas! It certainly exceeds all my expectations ... Hence the title to this reflection.

Well, the perennial script this time of year between my beloved and myself goes a little like this.

"What do you want for Christmas?" Germaine asks.

"The usual," I reply. "Socks, underwear, I suppose; and of course, since I like to fly and don't have one of my own, an airplane would be nice."

"I wish I could get you a plane," she replies in earnest. "But what you really need are new slippers."

She's been trying to get me to replace my old, tattered slippers with the holes in the toes for several years now. This year she's determined, and I suspect she'll lavish me with a new pair we found at a slashed-discount price yesterday when we went Christmas shopping in the rain.

The crowds were sparse as we scurried past empty storefronts in the upscale Broadway Plaza section of Walnut Creek. Only a few years ago, entire shops that sold only exclusive brands of non-essential products bustled with activity. Times have changed. People's lowered expectations have finally declined to levels I've enjoyed for years. The chickens have come home to roost. The winnowing fork has done its job, it seems. So where's the good news?

"Salvation" in the holiday season seems to most often be expressed in terms of economic recovery. Will consumer spending save retailers at year's end? Early numbers beginning with Black Friday and Cyber Monday indicate mixed results. My reasoning has always been to wait till December 26th, and take advantage of the post-holiday sale prices. Since there are twelve days in the Christmas season, I would argue, and the Wise Men didn't even arrive to set the example with their extravagant gifts until Twelfth Night, what's the rush? I could never convince my children when they were young, and Germaine still won't go for it even now.

Perhaps if I were to lavish her with one sparkly bauble or trinket each day for twelve days she'd be more receptive? On the first day of Christmas, my true love could receive a partridge in a pear tree. On the second day, two turtle doves; on the third day, three calling birds, and so forth.

But according to the annual "Christmas Price Index" compiled by PNC Wealth Management, making one's true love happy will cost a whopping \$87,403 this year, up 1% from last year.

As you might guess, the main driver behind the higher cost is the price of gold for the five rings. Although wage increases were modest, nine ladies dancing, at \$5,473 per performance, is the costliest item, surpassing that of any of the material goods. The most expensive goods are the seven swans a-swimming at \$5,250. Costs for the 10 lords a-leaping, 11 pipers piping, and 12 drummers drumming remained the same as last year – reflecting labor market conditions in which the unemployment rate rose to 10%.

And for those who would shop online, a word of caution. Internet prices are higher than their non-Internet counterparts because of associated shipping costs for all those damn birds.

Presumably, I could take comfort it's up a mere \$794 over last year. However, since we rarely even budget \$794 for all our Christmas spending in this household, such extravagance would certainly make this year the costliest Christmas for us on record.

Fortunately, and in the nick of time, I heard of a possible antidote enabling me to resist any such temptation; described on NPR's marketplace the other day. The radio host interviewed a behavioral economist, Dan Ariely, along with his new book, *Predictably Irrational*; about tips on how to practice self-control over the holidays.

Studies have shown if you exercise self-control you can supposedly increase it a little bit over time. That's the good news. Unfortunately, it was further found that as controls and resources were increasingly depleted over time, then the more people would try to resist, the harder it became when the opportunity arose to satisfy what we desire. This only makes sense to me. A starving beggar is much more likely to steal a loaf of bread.

Yet it's not simply that I can't afford to break the bank this year, or that I have superhuman powers to resist the temptation, when it comes to thinking about what I might give and receive this Christmas. And it's all got me thinking a little more seriously this Advent season. It's along the lines of some of the ideas expressed by progressive evangelical, Jim Wallis, who's publishing a book next month, *Rediscovering Values: On Wall Street, Main Street, and Your Street -- A Moral Compass for the New Economy*.

"The Great Recession that has gripped the world, defined the moment, and captured all of our attention has also revealed a profound values crisis. Just beneath the surface of the economics debate, a deep national reflection is begging to take place and, indeed, has already begun in people's heads, hearts, and conversations. The questions it raises concern our personal, family, and national priorities; our habits of the heart; our measures of success; the values of our families and our children; our spiritual well-being; and the ultimate goals and purposes of life -- including our economic life.

Underneath the public discourse, this other conversation is emerging about who and what we want to be. By and large, the media has missed the deeper discussion and continues to focus only upon the surface of the crisis. And most of our politicians

just want to tell us how soon the crisis can be over. But there are deeper questions here and some fundamental choices to make.

It is also a sobering moment in our lives when we can see our own thoughtlessness, greed, and impatience writ large across the global sky. And it is a good time to start asking better questions. We must not go back to business as usual; rather, we need a *new normal*. The economic crisis exposed values that wrecked economies, cultures, families, and even our souls. A new normal could call us to return to virtues like enough-is-enough, we're-in-it-together, ... and a new meaning for both work and service."

This new normal as an economic paradigm may be emerging, and will differ from the old *back to business as usual* model. Typically it has all come about by necessity, not preferred choice. On Friday the House of Representatives passed sweeping financial regulatory legislation. Of course, it'll get significantly diluted in the Senate before anything comes to pass. But maybe, just maybe the public backlash against corporate greed, highly risky financial investments and excessive compensation packages reflects more than base envy and resentment on the part of the proletariat.

These days the subversive notion that enough-is-enough may be less about putting an end to unparalleled avarice, and more a suggestion that economic health might better be measured with terms like "sufficient abundance," rather than "unbridled GDP."

The economic realities of the "new normal" might just displace the old economic model of economic health; that seems to be a trickle down model, no matter how you slice it. Then there's the old line about John D. Rockefeller who was once asked, when will he would know when he had enough? To which he replied, "When I have just a little bit more." But as we also all know, Rockefeller is very much dead and gone; which suggests to me he actually has considerably less than "a little bit more."

A new term has emerged for all of this. "Recession education" is teaching us what we can learn from living with less. One token example of how the recession has changed American consumer behavior is a McKinsey Quarterly report that found cheaper products are increasingly preferred over name brands. What this means is that premium companies waiting for a return to normality following the recession may be disappointed. Their customers are now learning to live without expensive products; opting for the cheaper price than the modest preference for the old familiar name brands.

Now, what could all this possibly have to do with Advent, a message for Christmas this year, and the rather harsh gospel passage we read this evening?

John the Baptist came into town with a prediction some impending cataclysmic events were going to turn everything upside down. The good times for some were over, and their former entitlements were out the window. Everyone was not only going to have to make do with what they had, but give a little to others, as well. He might well have been

describing Wall Street, Main Street, and the street where you live; announcing the arrival of what sounds like an unwelcome austerity gospel to a less than enthusiastic crowd.

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But in so doing, he wasn't really telling the people something that wasn't obvious, inevitable and would soon come to pass. The Baptist's listeners were on the tiptoe of expectation, Luke tells us; as if they thought they already knew what they were going to get for Christmas. Old visions and prophecies, like the ones we read and recited from Zephaniah and Psalm 85 tonight, describe the "return" to gifts of abundance and business as usual that would presumably accompany the long-awaited coming of the Anointed One.

How should they then prepare instead for a scenario John was foretelling? One that digressed quite drastically from what they'd been expecting? What should they do? He gives them a sort of "gift list." It's a redistribution list of what they already have.

And he then tells them what they'll receive in return. It probably wasn't near the top of their wish list. But what will come, with "fire and Spirit," is *a winnowing fork*. What's coming is the means by which all that is valuable and worthwhile (Paul's wish list in Philippians about "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and ... anything worthy of praise"), might be separated from all the chaff, the clutter and the crap.

But what will come, with "fire and Spirit," is a winnowing fork -- the means by which all that is valuable and worthwhile might be separated from all the chaff, the clutter and the crap.

The Baptist doesn't stop there with his good news announcement. If we think his ideas exceed our expectations, just wait. He can't hold a candle to what's coming after him. The costliest Christmas is yet to come. If I thought giving my beloved one over-priced gift each day for 12 days cost too much, the one who is coming after the Baptist will show us how to give far more.

The costliest Christmas is about more than recession education. It's about how to live beyond measure, beyond excess, exceeding expectation. And the good news? It doesn't cost anything. Anyone can afford it. And, it costs everything.

Looking around us, the times are bleak. It is a bleak midwinter, when there's more of less and less of more. I can hardly afford anything; so I can give everything. The times are hard. Time to sing a little carol.

What then can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb.
And if I were a Wiseman I would do my part.
Yet what I can give him, I will give my heart.

Christina Rossetti, In the bleak midwinter