

# “Spend Less?”

Luke 3: 1-6

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From the Pulpit

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*Advent Prayer for Illumination: In the darkness of this Advent season, O God, startle us by your presence. Silence in us the noise of the world around us and silence in us any voice but your own. May your Spirit fall fresh on our hearts and minds this day. Amen.*

Today we continue our journey on the Advent Conspiracy, a movement conspiring to change the way we celebrate Christmas and to invite our world into the joyous celebration of Jesus' birth that enriches our hearts and world around us. This Advent Conspiracy reminds us that Christmas is so much more.

Eight words uncover this conspiracy---Worship Fully, **Spend Less**, Give More, Love All. Last week we were invited to Worship Fully: to breathe in the Spirit of the Season, to welcome the Holy Spirit into our hearts and slow us down in the fast paced season.

When we get to these week's topic: Spend Less---the challenge continues. Spend less is easier said than done in the Gray Thursday, Black Friday and Cyber Monday world. The reports indicate that Americans won't spend less money this Holiday season. We'll spend more.

According to the National Retailers Association, \$1.7 Billion dollars was spent on online this Thanksgiving Day alone.<sup>1</sup> Three Billion (\$3B) on Cyber Monday. A whopping

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<sup>1</sup> [www.bloomberg.com](http://www.bloomberg.com)

\$11B over the whole weekend. On average Holiday spending continues to increase, with a projected \$965 Billion industry between November and January. Individual spending increases as well, including the gifts we buy for ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

I'm guilty of shopping for myself this time of year. I'm guilty of not being prepared and hurrying through the Christmas Eve shopping frenzy to get the last items to complete some informal list I had going on in my head. I hurry. I make impulsive decisions. I am rushed for time. There are other things to do on Christmas Eve... so I keep going faster and faster through the stores.

I buy things I wish I didn't buy. One year I got home and began wrapping presents only to find that I wasn't quite sure how that silver watch and the red cashmere sweater got into my bag and all the way home. I couldn't remember who I was giving them to... Then I remembered, they were for me. The watch had a nice sparkle to it and it caught my eye. And that plush red cashmere sweater—well, it did cry out to me from the shelf where it sat lonely and longing for a good home.  
*(Merry Christmas to me!)*

I am reminded that Advent stands in stark contrast to the consumer marketplace and big box store. Again and again, year after year, Advent comes around as a wakeup call. Advent comes as a course correction to our hurried world.

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<sup>2</sup> National Retailers Association.

Enter into every Advent season, the unlikely but all too familiar character of John the Baptist. He's like a rude interruption to the holiday season. He's the most unChristmasy guest who came to your party. He's the one who isn't nicely behaved, he doesn't stop talking, he's rude. The next year you tell yourself not to invite him, but year after year, he keeps showing up. He's that guy.

No matter which gospel we choose, John the Baptizer keeps showing up. We know from other gospel accounts that, **John's larger than life; dripping honey, living in** such solidarity with the poor that he wears their clothes and eats their food. **He's a magnet who draws people from city streets and** countryside into the wilderness. You have to admit—John the Baptizer is one strange dude – unwashed, uncivilized, uncompromising, and discomfoting.

Every year, the church has insisted that we hear from John, even though he is probably the most unChristmasy character in the whole Bible. We cannot get to Christmas without hearing from John the Baptist. Why?

**First and foremost,** John points toward the coming of Jesus. John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **“I baptize you with water for repentance,** but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am

not worthy to carry his sandals.” He points the way to the one who is to come. He makes sure that we look up and see.

**The second reason.** John is here because speaks the utterly necessary and discomfoting word that needs to be spoken before Christmas makes any kind of sense. John’s unChristmasy, yet needful word? “Repent.”

The Greek word in the Bible for Repent is *Metanoia*, meaning “to change direction,” “to turnaround,” “to do a 180.” However uncomfortable it may be, this is a word that must intrude on our Holiday cheer. “Repent” implies, quite simply and obviously, that something is wrong, wrong in this old world and wrong in me. We cannot dodge this fact, that we must – always and repeatedly – be correcting our course.

In order truly to prepare ourselves for the advent of Christ, we must own up to this fundamental fact: there is that in us and in the world that is wrong and needs changing.

John the Baptist tells us to change the orientation of our lives. Turnaround. Turn from the current emperor to a new authority. Turn from fear to hope, from unhealthy old habits to life giving new ones. **John takes us by the shoulders and turns us around** from the trivial to the transcendent, from taking on too many tasks to saying ‘no, not now,’ from filling our lives with stuff to freeing our lives for something more. John takes us by the shoulders and turns us around. Because if we don't turn around, we won't see who is coming.

We try our darndest to fill our lives with so much that we can't possibly hold any more room for Jesus to enter. John the Baptist....the uninvited, rowdy Christmas guest comes this time of year to remind us---that we need to do something different or else we'll miss the Christ child all together.

A friend suggested I check out a modern day John the Baptist. This week, I watched a docu-comedy called *What Would Jesus Buy?* The subtitle is *The Movie that Santa Doesn't Want You to See*. It stars Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir.<sup>3</sup> A man named Bill went to New York City and discovered that Times Square was so commercialized that he needed to speak out against it. So much so that he bought himself clergy collar to match his white tuxedo he used while waiting tables. He bleached his hair and became Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping.

A few years ago, Rev. Billy and his followers were on a cross country mission to save Christmas from the apocalypse of shopping. The Shopocalypse! The Shopocalypse signals the end of humanity due to consumerism, over consumption and the fires of eternal debt.

Now Rev. Billy is out there, preaching in the wilderness of Target and Walmart and Disneyland. He rants and raves in

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<sup>3</sup> [www.revbilly.com](http://www.revbilly.com)

sermon and song. He preaches a gospel of repentance to us, to people who, as he puts it, are “addicted and conflicted, hypnotized and consumerized.” He won’t give up and he won’t change his message. Again and again security guards kick him off location and time after time he rallies. He cries, “Will we walk in the Valley of the Shadow of Debt or will we find a new way to give a gift this Christmas?”

Can you hear him, a voice crying out in the wilderness? Can any of us hear the cries for a different way to live?

Rev. Billy is a John the Baptist for our day. Like John, he’s preaching against the empire. He sees beneath the surface of things to what it is that holds us captive. This movie really is seriously hilarious. The serious part comes with the statistics, the reality that 60% of Americans are saddled by long term debt, that three quarters of us view Christmas with dread, and that while we spend, on average, under one hour a week in worship, we spend over five hours a week shopping. Rev. Billy preaches to us from the fringe. He suggests: “What if a billion people paused at the cash register and seriously asked themselves the question—what would I do with this gift? We could reclaim the greatest gift of all.”

I wish I had paused at the cash register that day when I over spent and bought myself that sparkly watch and red cashmere sweater. I wish I would turned around or stepped out

of line or looked the cashier in the eyes when he got to the red sweater and said, “I don’t need this.”

We all know that all of this spending doesn’t celebrate the true meaning of Christmas-- so how did that cashmere sweater wind up in my shopping cart?

Rev. Billy, John the Baptist are preaching something we need to hear this season. We don’t get a reprieve from this message. Really, the message isn’t spend less, but spend more. Don’t spend more money----I suggest we think in a different currency. The currency of Time, Energy, Affection. That currency is more complex than the economics of national retailers. Maybe the turn, “the 180”, the course correction for our lives is from spending less to spending more – spending more love, compassion, and courage. Share the best parts of ourselves with the people we love the most...those are the things we really need.

Scott and Gabby Dannemiller tried to do just that. The Dannemillers took on a family challenge for a year. Their basic rule: “Don’t buy stuff.” Their book, *A Year without a Purchase* (Westminister John Knox, 2015), (Ironically, you can buy one of their books on Amazon.com), chronicles their year. They developed a family mission statement and tried to align their lives, their spending and their habits with it. Here it is: *Live with integrity. Own what you have. Grow in Faith. Serve Others.*

They wanted to refocus their lives on the important things. This was a turnaround for their middle class family.

They found hand-me down clothes and shoes for their two growing children. They fixed things that broke unless it cost more than a replacement. They gave gifts in the form of **charitable donations, or “experience gifts” (like trip to the zoo or travel to see friends or family)**. The challenge wasn't so much about saving money (although they did that), but to focus on the important things in life—God, Family and Neighbor. They asked themselves, **“Is this purchase really going to add meaning to my life?”** If the answer was no, then they found a different way.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, they freed their lives of stuff in order to embrace a new reality of personal growth and found deeper connections with family and friends. They spent more. More of their imagination, more time fostering relationships--more of themselves for each other.

John the Baptist and Rev. Billy, like the prophet Isaiah before them, cry out for a different way. They grab us by the shoulders and they turn us around. They call our attention to the way things are and point us in the direction of something that is worth so much more.

Already this Advent, we know the things in the world and the things in our lives are not what they are supposed to be.

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<sup>4</sup> Scott and Gabby Dannemiller. *A Year without a Purchase*. (Westminster John Knox Press). 2015.

Turn on the evening news, read the morning paper. More illness, more deaths due gun violence, more inequalities in power, more prejudice in communities, more are hungry, more are homeless, more children lost to the refugee crisis of our day. ...**Across the country, the people holding candles and marching in the streets are crying out for a better way. For a more just way to be in this world. Our world is crying out for a better way.**

Can you hear the voice crying out in the wilderness?

*There's so much inequality. Prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight.*

*So much violence. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low.*

*So much hunger. And the crooked shall be made straight.*

*So many refugees. And the rough ways made smooth.*

*Too much loneliness. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

In Advent we plunge into the deep, dark waters of our worst world. We re-surface, gasping for air and encounter the hopeful, hovering Spirit of God.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Quote from PC(USA) colleague, Karen Ware Jackson's Facebook post on Advent, 2014.

May this Advent be filled with the things that matter the most. May this Advent be filled with the currency of our best selves. May our hands be free of shopping bags and the heavy burdens that weigh us down. May our hands be open to receive the One whom God is sending. May we turnaround and be ready for the One we are waiting for. The one who brings new life-a new creation-a new way of being, Our Emmanuel, God with us.

Amen.

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