

After some last-minute Christmas shopping, a woman was rushing her grandchildren into the car. It was then that four-year-old Jason said, "Grandma, Susie has something in her pocket." He then proceeded to reach into Susie's pocket and pulled out a new red barrette.

Though she was tired, this grandmother knew it was important for Susie to put the item back where she had found it. They did just that. Then they headed to the grocery store. Later at the grocery store checkout, the clerk asked, "Have you kids been good so Santa will come?"

"I've been very good," replied Jason, "but my sister just robbed a store." (1)

I hope all our adults are being good. After all, Santa is watching.

It is interesting how each of the Gospels tells about the coming of Christ in a different way.

Matthew prepares us for this wondrous story by giving us a list of Jesus' ancestors back through the reign of King David, all the way back to Adam. Then he tells us about Mary and Joseph and the announcement by an angel that Mary will conceive a child by the Holy Spirit. This, says the angel, is to fulfill a prophecy of Isaiah (7:14), "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). Then Matthew moves to Jesus' birth and the story of the star in the heavens that leads the magi to the house where the young child lay.

Luke tells the story in a slightly different way. Luke begins with an angel announcing to Zechariah and Elizabeth, John the Baptist's parents, that a son will be born to them in their advanced age. Then Luke tells about the angel's announcement to Mary that she will bear a child. Then he tells about a visit Mary makes to Elizabeth's home where Mary delivers her beautiful hymn of praise which the church has termed the Magnificat. Then Luke tells about Christ's birth with the angels praising God in the heavens and the shepherds hurrying to Bethlehem to worship the newborn babe.

The Gospel of John, written much later than the other Gospels, dispenses with the genealogies and the birth narratives altogether. Instead John goes back all the way to the beginning of time to let us know that Christ was present at creation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it . . ." Then John moves almost immediately to Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist.

And then there is the Gospel of Mark. Most scholars believe Mark was the first Gospel to be recorded. It is thought that Mark was fearful that those who were witnesses to the coming of Christ would die before anyone prepared a written testimony to Christ's life. So Mark wrote in a hurry, giving us a bare-bones account of Christ's life, death and resurrection. So there are no shepherds in Mark's account, no magi. Neither are there theological reflections as in John. However, like John, Mark begins with Jesus' baptism. Mark's Gospel begins like this: The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

And so John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem go out to him. Confessing their sins, they are baptized by him in the Jordan River. John was a strange looking spokesman for God. He wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

So, almost immediately, Mark moves to the gist of the Gospel, Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist with the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove. And a voice coming from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Our introduction to the coming of Christ in Mark's Gospel isn't angels singing in the heavens or a bright star moving toward Bethlehem. **Instead, it is John the Baptist out in the wilderness. John has an announcement to make.**

There is a story about a church one Sunday morning in Charlotte, N. C. It came time for the sermon. The preacher was just about to open his mouth and begin when suddenly a man in the balcony a stranger, a man nobody knew stood up and said in a loud clear voice, "I have a word from the Lord." Heads swiveled around. Whatever this word from the Lord was, no one ever got to hear it because "two bouncers disguised as ushers bounded like gazelles up the balcony stairway and muscled him out of the sanctuary and into the street." (2) It was a Sunday morning to remember.

I'm not surprised the ushers hustled this man out. Our first thought is that he was a nut. But what if he did have a word from God? That's possible, isn't it? What if his message was authentic? We will never know, because the ushers were in a hurry to keep him from disrupting worship. That's kind of scary if you think about it. A person might have a genuine message from God and we might dismiss him as a nut, a radical, a trouble maker. John the Baptist was someone with a genuine announcement from God.

Usually announcements in church are kind of boring, aren't they? Unless, of course, they get mangled. One pastor chuckled over a typo that changed the meaning of an announcement that appeared in his church bulletin: "Choir rehearsal this afternoon at 3:30. Everyone who wishes to sin in the choir must come to practice." I seriously doubt there is more sinning in the choir than anywhere else. And they certainly don't need practice. You have to be careful about announcements though. Or "Weight Watchers going to the basement meeting room should use the large double doors in the back of the Church."

At one small college in the Northeast, snow had been coming down steadily for hours when an announcement came over the intercom: "Will the students who are parked on College Drive please move their cars so that we may begin plowing?"

Twenty minutes later there was another announcement: "Plowing has been completed. The six hundred and twenty-seven students who went to move 26 cars can return to class now." (3)

John the Baptist is out in the wilderness. He is strangely dressed. He is contending that he has a word from God. He has an announcement that the world needs to hear. This is important for us to see. The Christian faith is not a truth that someone has discovered or an idea that someone has carefully thought out. Christian faith is an announcement, it is a proclamation. It is an act of revelation. The Gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate. It is an announcement! It is an announcement of God's wondrous love.

An angel makes an announcement to Elizabeth and Zechariah that Elizabeth will bear a child even at their advanced age. An angel makes an announcement to Mary and then confirms it to Joseph that she will bear a child whose name will be Emmanuel. Later John the Baptist will make an announcement to the people of Israel. And what is that announcement that John makes? "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

This is the heart of Advent and Christmas. We love all the preparations for Christmas: lights, music, parties, family coming in, manger scenes, and all the other wonderful elements of this season of the year. But none of it means anything without this announcement by John of the coming Messiah: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John was announcing the coming of the Messiah.

Really, on the surface, John's announcement doesn't sound all that dramatic. Basically all he says is that this Messiah is someone very special, someone much more worthy than John himself. It is clear that even John could not grasp the full meaning of his announcement. It took more sophisticated theologians to see that this Messiah was not just a messenger of God, but was God Himself in human form. He was the Word made flesh. Isaiah prophesied this very thing hundreds of years before Christ's birth. He wrote in our lesson for today, "You who

bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!'" (v. 9).

John's announcement was greater than even he could realize. **He was introducing to the world the incarnate God.**

It's like a story that theologian Dale Bruner tells about a little boy named Gabriel Hurles. In January 2009 Gabriel turned six years old. Gabriel was so focused on eating his birthday cake, that he hardly noticed a giant package in the corner of the room. When another child pointed out the large gift, Gabriel ran over and began to tear off the wrapping. When the package was open, Gabriel discovered it wasn't a bicycle or any of the other items a six-year-old would dream about for Christmas. Rather, it was Gabriel's dad, Army Specialist Casey Hurles, home on leave from the war in Iraq. Gabriel and his father had been apart for seven months, so when Casey learned his leave would coincide with his son's birthday, he hatched a plan to offer Gabriel an amazing surprise. He had himself wrapped up as the ultimate birthday gift for his child. (4)

In essence, that's what God did for us that first Christmas. He offered Himself as an amazing surprise. He wrapped Himself up in the form of a tiny baby. Everything we know about God, we learn from his son, Jesus Christ. He is the Word made flesh.

Origen, in the third century, offered a different kind of analogy. He told of a village with a huge statue. This statue was so immense you couldn't see exactly what it was supposed to represent. Finally, someone miniaturized the statue so one could see the person it honored. Origen said, "That is what God did in his Son."

In Colossians 1 Paul tells us Christ is the self-miniaturization of God, the visible icon or image of the invisible God. In Christ we have God in a comprehensible way. In Christ we have God's own personal and definitive visit to the planet. (5)

Without even realizing the full scope of his message, John announced that God Himself had come to this world. But there is a second facet to John's announcement. **John also announced that another baptism was coming, a baptism of the Holy Spirit.** "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." You and I take great comfort in our baptism. To say that we are baptized into the Christian faith is one of the most important things that can ever happen to us. It is a sign that we have joined God's family.

I love the way one little girl described it. Before I give you that description, however, you need to know that out on the cattle ranches of the West the unbranded calves that roam at large are known as "mavericks." They are claimed by the man who is first to get his brand on them at the annual round up. A little Western girl had been baptized one Sunday by a local minister. Her schoolmates questioned her the next day as to the meaning of the ceremony. "Well," she said, "I will just tell you. I was a little maverick out on the prairie and that man put the Jesus mark on my forehead so that when Jesus sees me He will know that I am one of His children." (6)

Well, yes, baptism is something like that. It does mark us as one of God's children. But it is more than that. It is a sign of new life in Christ Jesus.

In the movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" three escaped convicts come across a group of people dressed in white. They are singing as they pass mysteriously through the woods toward the river. The three ne'er-do-wells follow the singers. They come upon a service down by the river where people are lining up to be baptized. One of the convicts rushes into the water to be baptized. When he emerges from the water he exclaims that the minister told him that all his sins have been washed away. Even, he says, when he stole that pig for which he'd been convicted.

"But you said you were innocent of that," says one of his comrades.

"I lied," he says, "and that's been washed away too!!"

And we do see a change in this former scoundrel. His friends steal an apple pie from a windowsill. But a hand reaches up and leaves money for the apple pie. It is this newly baptized saint of God.

Baptism is more than a ceremony. It is more than a symbol. Something that deals with the hidden reality. Baptism is a renewing of the mind. It is allowing the spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit to come into our life and make us new people. There is the baptism of water, but there is also a baptism of the Holy Spirit. That happens when we consciously invite Christ to take up residence in our lives. We often say at this time of the year that we wish the Christmas spirit could stay with us all year long. This is the secret of maintaining the Christmas Spirit. It is to pray that God will send His Holy Spirit to take up a permanent residence in our lives, and that is the greatest gift that we can receive.

A certain church was performing Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. At the end of the play, miserly Ebenezer Scrooge is transformed by the meaning of Christmas. He wants to share his newfound joy with someone, so he calls to a poor newsboy, "Come up here, boy. I've got something wonderful for you." Out of the audience would come a scruffy newsboy to receive a few coins. But this particular night, another little boy in the audience was so entranced by the story that he spontaneously rose and walked up to the stage when Scrooge made his announcement. He thought the invitation was for him: "Come up here, boy. I've got something wonderful for you." (7)

It is something wonderful and we all are invited to receive it. God Himself has come into our world. He offers to all the gift of His Holy Spirit, His presence with us to comfort and empower. Won't you receive that gift this day?

1. Laugh & Lift - <http://www.laughandlift.com/>.
2. The Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long, <http://www.nationalcathedral.org/worship/sermonTexts/tl080601.shtml>.
3. MONDAY FODDER, <http://family-safe-mail.com/>.
4. "Is Jesus Inclusive or Exclusive?" *Theology, News, and Notes of Fuller Seminary* (Oct. 1999), p. 4.
5. C. Philip Green, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-sermon-central-staff-stories-christmas-78736.asp>.
6. *The Evangelical Christian*.
7. "A World Without Christmas" by C. Thomas Hilton, *The Clergy Journal*, Nov./Dec. 2000, p. 44.

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