

**Getting in Shape for Christmas (1): Health Assessment  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
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Text: Mark 1:1-8**

The image of the season for me so far was reflected in the photograph of the grim-faced woman identified by the Associated Press as a shopper the day after Thanksgiving. It wasn't in Cleveland, but it could have been anywhere. She pushed a cart loaded high with boxes and packages. Around her were several children of assorted ages, also weighed down with bags and bundles. Not one of them was smiling. The woman was wearing a sweatshirt upon which was emblazoned, "Christmas shopping is not for wimps." Well, I guess not.

We turn our sights now to Jesus' birthday, and the celebration of heavenly love coming down to earth. We're busily on our way to Christmas, waiting to hear again divine promises of peace and goodwill, to light candles that cut through the gathering darkness of winter, and to sing beloved carols proclaiming "joy to the world." Yet I'm struck by the words we use to describe this month: stress, anxiety, rush-rush-rush. Most of us try to pack far too much in, and find our time stretched to the breaking point.

Is there an antidote for this mad dash to a perfect Christmas day? "Prepare," exhorts the prophet John. His idea of preparation is a far cry from the buying, decorating, sending, baking, purchasing, and partying that characterize most of ours. Instead, John sounds a solemn note, an uncompromising call to a different way. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as our text puts it, is the distinctly un-cheerful appearance of John, known as the baptizer. "Repent," he says, "turn from your sins, and get washed clean! Straighten up, and prepare the way for the Lord!" For Christians, Christmas does not begin with the joy of a baby's birth; rather it begins in longing; a sense that

things are not as they should be, and a prayer to get it right. Listen for God's word to the church in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the first chapter at the first verse.

**[MARK 1:1-8]**

The dynamic TV preacher, pastor of one of the nation's largest and fastest growing churches, was interviewed about his success. The talk-show host asked, "How do you account for your popularity?" He responded, "People are tired of getting beaten up in the name of Jesus. They're tired of being told they're not right. *Jesus loves you just as you are, that's my message.*" [quoted by William Willimon in *Pulpit Resource, Volume 36, No. 1, p.42*]

On the one hand, I could see his point. There is nothing more important than proclaiming the unconditional love of God demonstrated so compellingly in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. But when you get right down to it, there's no need for "unconditional" love if everything is okay to begin with. People don't need a savior if there's nothing from which to be saved. It's annoying and downright dangerous to cry out "fire!" in a crowded auditorium. . . . unless there is a fire.

The season of Advent functions as a kind of "fire alarm" for the church. Every year we encounter the stern message of John the Baptist, calling us to "repent," to turn around and go in a different direction. But the point is not to beat you up, or give you a spiritual inferiority complex. It's to alert you and me to reality—the truth we may wish to ignore because it calls for change in our lives. In contrast to the cultural imperative to have ourselves a merry little Christmas, Christian faith wants us to celebrate large, to be filled with wonder and awe at God's goodness and love for the whole world, and to keep Christmas not for a day or a season, but forever.

So I propose a spiritual fitness regimen that will help us get in shape. It was the sermon germination group who explored the Scripture passage for this sermon who observed that it sometimes takes a wake-up call to get you back on track—and

in fact, the more challenging your life is, the more open you are to change. John the Baptizer's message seemed to attract the people worn down by oppressive circumstance and longing for things to be different; the religious leaders who held a measure of power and a stake in the status quo, not so much. But the group also pointed out that even the most comfortably situated person could have their expectations raised and pursue a larger vision.

Whether from the heights or the depths, getting in shape spiritually will take discipline and practice, the way physical fitness does. I consulted with a personal trainer who outlined his approach for helping people achieve greater health and vitality, a more active lifestyle and a longer, more fulfilling life.

That always begins with a health assessment, an honest look at the way things really are with us. The spiritual equivalents of checking our blood pressure, cholesterol level, weight and height, stamina, condition of our joints and ability to exercise—the whole nine yards. The trainer pointed out that people come to him for help after they've made up their minds to improve their fitness. Sometimes it's the result of health concerns or a doctor's order. Sometimes it's the person's own desire to feel better and stronger. Motivation matters, because better health doesn't happen overnight or with a week of workouts. It takes perseverance and practice. Getting up and going to the gym when you'd rather snuggle back in bed; making changes in one's diet; learning new ways to cope with stress. It takes time.

How do you think John the Baptizer would assess our spiritual health here today? Can you see him sizing us up from the pulpit, or maybe striding down the center aisle? I think he might challenge the notion that faith is about meeting our own needs rather than following where Christ leads. . . he might well take us to task about the growing gap between the haves and have-nots. . . might name out loud our addictions to work and alcohol and things. . . might demand a review of our priorities that leave so little time for God.

The change he might call for comprises the cutting edge between the way things are and the way God intends for things to be. All and always to prepare us for truly good news. To point the way to God, who alone can save us. . . .from insignificance, from boredom, from self-absorption. God has sent the Son with a human face to show us what true life is, and how it can be ours, now and forever. I love the way one of the sermon germination group described the change: it's the pitch black of night turning to midnight blue—assurance that sunrise is not far off, restoring hope and resolve to carry on till daybreak.

What might change if we thought of Christian faith not as duty or obligation or cultural remnant we've inherited, but as an adventure demanding our very best? Something so rewarding, so purposive, so joyful, that we give it priority in our daily life? Just for this season, say between now and Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, commit to a daily discipline of Bible reading and prayer—the devotional guide prepared by our Faith Formation Council and written by fellow Fairmounters provides excellent help. Just for this season, commit to worshiping every week without fail. Try it as an experiment in better spiritual fitness—an experiment that every trainer and expert will tell you is more effective when shared with others. We can support one another—and hold one another accountable! And imagine what our lives—and our church--- could be like when lived with spiritual strength and vibrancy!

There is no better place to begin a spiritual fitness plan than here, at the table of our Lord. In some ways this meal is a paradox: remembering Christ's death that brought us life; breaking bread that unites us with God and one another; pouring out a cup that fills us up with abundant blessing. Here we are welcomed and accepted, loved without reason or measure, but with transforming purpose. At the Lord's table we receive a little taste today that encourages us to stick with it until the Kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. Brothers and sisters, are you ready for the beginning of the

good news? It won't conclude some 18 days from now, as Advent finally gives way to Christmas. The baby in the manger was sent precisely to be that One who changes us from the inside out. The One who makes all things new and whose transforming love heals every broken heart, straightens every crooked place, and satisfies the longing of every hungry soul. AMEN.

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