

As a child, Austin Shelley, a colleague in ministry, lived with her grandparents and siblings inside a 526-square foot home in rural South Carolina. Since money was tight for them, her grandfather kept track of every penny they spent, careful to dole out money only when needed—with one exception: the grocery bill. That was the provenance of Austin and her grandmother. As she reflected recently: “every Saturday [my grandmother] and I whisked into town in her faded blue Ford Torino. As I pushed our cart up and down the aisles of the Red & White, she carefully selected food in duplicate—two boxes of cereal, two jars of peanut butter, two bags of flour—until our cart looked like an abstract rendering of Noah’s ark with its produce and nonperishable food items arranged two by two.”¹

After checking out, they’d “load the car with heavy paper grocery bags, and drive straight to the town’s food bank, where [her] grandmother would donate exactly half of everything she’d just purchased.”

“When [Austin] was eight or nine years old, [she] asked [her] grandmother for a name-brand cereal [that she’d] seen on a television commercial. ‘We can’t afford that one,’” her grandmother told her. In classic 8-year-old backtalk, Austin replied: “we can if we don’t buy two of them.” Woah.

With the steely resolve that only a grandmother can possess, Austin’s grandma stopped what she was doing, looked her granddaughter straight in the eye, and said: “If we can’t afford two, we can’t afford one.”²

So much for that.

John the Baptist would be proud. No one better embodies his message this morning than Austin’s grandmother. As hoards of people line up to hear first-hand about this soon-to-come Messiah, John reminds them that such grace calls forth a life of love, generosity, and mercy. In other words, you can’t have your cake and eat it too. *The Message’s* translation says it best:

“You, brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your *life* that must

¹ Austin Crenshaw Shelley, “December 16, Advent 3C (Luke 3:7-18),” *Living By the Word, Christian Century*, November 6, 2018, accessed December 15, 2018, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/december-16-advent-3c-luke-37-18>.

² *Ibid.*

change, not your skin. And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father.' Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire...if you have two coats, give one away...and do the same with your food..."

To John, repentance is not an abstract, intellectual matter. It's a way of living rooted in God's dream—a dream that seeks not simply an immediate fix but a complete healing and restoration of all of creation. It's more than simply getting on our knees and praying the confession each week. It's taking a good look at our lives and the ways in which we justify and excuse our complacency, contempt, and scarcity at the expense of caring for all of God's people. It's not enough to ask what can we do after we've gotten our fill of things. Instead the more important question is "what must be done for the sake of God?"³

That's the question that Austin recently found herself reckoning with after reflecting on her childhood. I know it's convicted me. She explained that while the crowds who've gathered to be baptized by John were eager to ask: "What shall we do? These days we are more inclined to ask, 'Isn't it perfectly rational, even necessary, to hang on to a fleece pullover for the fall, a down coat for winter, and a lightweight rain jacket for spring?'" It's only after we've decided on our wardrobe that we'll see what we have left over to give away. I know I certainly do more than I care to admit. I work hard I tell myself, I should get to have X,Y, and Z. And yes, I do work hard—like you do—but anything I or anyone else does, is first because we have been created in the image of God and enabled to do what we do. Somehow, we've become convinced that having money to buy things is a reward for our hard earned labor *rather than* an invitation to a life embodying God's love.

In a few weeks we will host Safe Nights—our community's rotating winter shelter. While I am so proud of this congregation for doing so, I've also been sobered (and frankly disappointed) by those (an admittedly small few) who have complained that our guests will cause a rise in our utilities and make an already busy month in our parish life more complicated. Do we not see the privilege in being able to even to complain about rising utilities and still pay them? It's not us who are sleeping in cars or riding the bus all day to stay warm. Rather, we're the ones going home to our cozy living rooms with our plethora of blankets and cable channels to entertain and numb us from life's heartaches.

³ Willie James Jennings, "Third Sunday of Advent: Connecting the Reading with the Word," in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, ed. By Joel B. Green, et al., Year C, Volume 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018),46.

If we are to ready our hearts and homes for the coming of the Christ child we have to first acknowledge that Christ didn't come to save *some* of us, he came to redeem and heal the world—every single one of us. The 13th century Dominican monk Meister Eckhart said it best: “What good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of Man is begotten in us.”⁴

Today,
tomorrow,
and the day after that...
as you go about your shopping and prepping,
will you let yourself be overwhelmed by the inestimable love and devotion of God that's at the heart of the incarnation?
Then will you share that love?
Will you, like the crowds, be eager to be transformed?
No small act is wasted. Over time, like water upon a seed, they come forth and lead to new life. The Good News of John's word is that Christ has endowed and called us to be God's hands and feet *because* God has *first* endowed each of us to live in God's image.

You are no less capable and able than Austin's grandmother was with her grocery cart.
You are no more improbable a witness and bearer of Christ's love and ministry than Mary.

You and the rest of this world are nothing less than
God's dream coming true.

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⁴ Meister Eckhart, quoted in Suzanne Guthrie, “Advent 4” *At the Edge of Enclosure*, accessed December 15, 2018, <http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/mysticaljourney/adventiv.html>. I am incredibly grateful to The Rev. Mariclaire Partee Carlsen for her brilliant and moving reflection from which I first read Eckhart's words.