

Sermon Monologue on John the Baptist
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Luke 3: 1-6

Message begins with image of Wal-Mart projected on screen.

Lisa: I always wanted to meet John the Baptist, this desert wild man who lived on locusts and honey, who announced that Jesus was coming and that people had better get ready. Well, I got the chance. I met John the Baptist the other day. I met him at Wal Mart.

Frank: As I drove up by Burger King to turn into the parking lot, I expected to see the same guy I always see holding a sign that reads, "I'll work for food." But this time he wasn't there. Someone else was in his place. This new guy looked just as disheveled but quite a bit wilder in the eyes. He held a sign made out of a torn-up cardboard box. It read, "It's time for a change."

Lisa: I passed within two feet of him as I turned into the parking lot. He caught my eye for a moment and held my gaze as I made the turn, almost causing a pile up. But to be honest, once I was in the store I didn't think of him again.

Frank: I got my cart and combed the store for all the essentials. More clear bulbs for the window candles, a few more extension cords, Christmas-patterned paper towels. Then into the checkout line where I exchanged holiday pleasantries with other hurried shoppers while I scratched a couple of items off my "to do" list.

Lisa: Before picking up my bags I reached into my wallet for some extra change. I have a personal holiday policy of never passing a Salvation Army kettle without putting something in it. (*Show picture of SA Red Kettle*) I wondered if my policy was really one of generosity or if it simply helped me avoid the guilt I felt when I passed by a kettle and the collector wished me "Merry Christmas" anyway.

Frank: With packages up to my chin, a fist full of pennies, and a swoosh of the automatic doors, I was out of the building. I immediately heard the bell; but there was no kettle, only John the Baptist ringing the bell and still holding his sign, "It's time for a change." He didn't look like an official of the Salvation Army, but who am I to judge?

Lisa: "Nice sign," I said. "If it's change you want I've got some right here in my hand." I thought it was witty. He was clearly not amused.

Frank: "Are you prepared?" he asked me with intimidating intensity.

Lisa: "Well, not yet. That's what all these packages are about. I've got a lot of decorating to do and I haven't even started baking. It's more than a little overwhelming. So, I've started a list of things I simply must do to be prepared."

Frank: "Let me help you," he said. Again he held my gaze. I wondered what he could do to lighten my burden. "Let me buy you a cup of coffee."

Lisa: "Wait a minute. You're the one standing out in the cold with a sign. I thought I was supposed to buy you the coffee."

Frank: He didn't say a word. He just tucked his sign under his arm and unburdened me of some of my baggage. Pointing to my day planner, he said, "Better bring that with you." So, I picked up my planner and followed him back into the Wal Mart.

Lisa: There in the snack bar over a hot cup of coffee he leafed his way through my life - my lists and schedule. Most of the time he just shook his head. Occasionally he would let out a disapproving grunt. Once he mumbled something sarcastic under his breath. I felt like a school girl watching a teacher grade a test and realizing that I hadn't answered a single question correctly.

Frank: Then he brightened up. "Ok, here's something I like," he finally said. "Get rid of clutter. Clear a path. Tell me about that."

Lisa: I explained that my living room was strewn with boxes of Christmas decorations that had been hiding in my attic. I needed time to sort out the Santa place mats from the nativity scenes and to clear a path through my living room in time for the Session Christmas party.

Frank: His shoulders fell with disappointment, and he went back to his review. When he had finished reading, he turned to a new page in my planner. Then he reached in his pocket and pulled out an old pencil stub. It was the kind you use to keep score in miniature golf, and it was worn down to half its size but freshly sharpened as if prepared for this moment. He smoothed the paper, being sure to flatten any bends, wrinkles, or raised places. He then touched the tip of his pencil to his tongue and wrote for me a new list. I watched in silence as this vagabond in the small town wilderness wrote intently on the pages of my priorities.

Lisa: At the top of the page he wrote, "DO LIST." Number 1 said, "Hold a baby." What a strange instruction. Before I could ask him to explain I heard a woman next to me let out a squeal. Her toddler had climbed up a display to get a closer look at a stuffed Tickle-Me-Something-or-Other. The display began to teeter. Without a word between us she passed me her newborn to hold as she ran after her little climber.

(Show picture of a baby)

Frank: I looked down at the bundle she had placed in my arms. He was so tiny, so fragile. He reached for my face with his delicate hand. The music on the store's sound system played an instrumental version of "What Child Is This?" and for a moment I wasn't in Wal Mart but in Bethlehem. I was holding close to me the tiny body of the one whose body would be broken for me. The tiny hand reaching for me was the hand that would reach out to embrace the cosmos and then bear a nail on my behalf.

Lisa: Too soon an announcement of a store-wide special broke into the moment, and the mother returned for her baby. I glanced back at my planner and saw Number 2: "Wonder." Wonder? Wonder what? Wonder why God chose a helpless little baby to bring salvation into a hostile world? Wonder why after thousands of years we still haven't gotten the message? Wonder when Christ will come again? I wondered. I wondered what to wonder. And I wondered some more.

Frank: The announcement came over the loudspeaker: Wal Mart was closing. Bring final purchases to the register. Where had the time gone? How long had I been sitting there? I looked around but didn't see John anywhere. I glanced down at the third item on my DO LIST: "Look to the stars." What did that mean?

(Show picture of Night Sky)

Lisa: As I walked outside I looked up to see a clear sky full of stars. There were thousands of them. More beautiful than the lights on any Christmas tree. They took my breath away. And I hadn't had to work to put them up there. I hadn't had to untangle the cords or check for dud star-bulbs. This light display required no extension cord. It was placed there for me as a gift, an unmerited spectacle of wonder.

Frank: There in the Wal Mart parking lot, looking into the night sky, I had a strong sense that I had been looking in the wrong place for Christmas. I had been too busy rushing around to look up. I had been so busy worrying about what I had to do that I forgot to appreciate what had already been done for me. I had been so preoccupied with following the crowd that I had neglected to follow the star.

Lisa: As I gazed into the sky, it seemed that one star was shining a little brighter than all the rest. *(Show picture of Bethlehem Star)* Remembering the stranger's admonition, I followed it. Perhaps it would lead me to Bethlehem. As I walked through the cold night, to my amazement, the light of the star seemed to fall upon . . . my car. In the starlight I could just see the cardboard sign, tucked under my windshield wiper. "It's time for a change," the sign reminded me.

Frank: No matter how your Advent Season is going so far, it is not too late. It is not too late to hold a child, to wonder, to look up, and to follow a star. It's not too late to testify to the news of the newborn king rather than the news of holiday specials in a stressed-out season. It's not too late for a change. Take it from me. I know it for a fact. I learned it the night I met John the Baptist at Wal Mart.