

Third Sunday in Advent
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Experts cannot seem to agree on the origin of the term, but most recognize that it first appeared in print in the early 1900's. Some trace it a little further back into the 1880's but the reference is suspect. The Bang family uses it often. Whenever someone sticks their nose into someone else's business, or comes snooping around when it is obvious that they have no business being there, we use the phrase nosey-parker, meaning, someone who parks their nose where it doesn't belong. In searching the Internet for its origins, the most likely explanation was that the phrase was originally nose poker, someone who pokes their nose where it doesn't belong; nose poker to be differentiated from the phrase often used to describe a less than intelligent, less than fastidious, less than sociable nose picker.

Nosy parker is a great phrase and it seems appropriate for many people at many times. We are, after all, an inquisitive species. When I looked up at the ceiling at the beginning of the sermon, at least half of you, perhaps even more, looked up as well. That's because we're nosy, and we share this trait with many other of God's creatures. If you have a dog, go home and go into the kitchen and stoop down to look in the cabinet under the sink. If your dog is on the loose, it's only a matter of time until he/she sticks his/her nose into your business. Right? Forget the dog, try it with your spouse, or better still, with your children. I'd be willing to bet there are as many nosey parkers in your family as there are in mine.

Then drive down the Thruway, and watch what happens if two cars pull off the road at the same time, or if a cop pulls some over, or worse, if there's an accident. We all complain when we get to that point where the accident happens, and we ALL say, is THAT what caused all that traffic, all the while staring out the side window ourselves. And the amount of traffic the incident creates is in direct proportion to the number of vehicles involved in the affair. Six car pile-up, six times the amount of traffic.

And God forbid if one of the cars is mangled, or rolled over, well that's an afternoon. And we all slow down to look, why is that, is it because we thought the first 400 car's worth of people didn't call it in or get out to help? NO, it's because we are by nature, say it with me, *nosy parkers*.

John the Baptist was by the River Jordan baptizing and the townsfolk, in the absence of any other kind of entertainment, came out to see what all the commotion was about. John was baptizing, preaching and calling for repentance; and the folk came sniffing around, hoping to hear something new, or see something spectacular; or, if it was a good day, both.

And seeing them, he turned to them and asked them why they were there. Now, presumably the ones who came to be baptized in the first place were there because they heard and came to believe what John was preaching about; namely, calling for repentance and a change of heart, if not a change of lifestyle, if not a change of attitude.

But then, there were these nosey parkers. Those who came, not to be baptized, not to hear about their need for repentance, not because they wanted to help, but merely to see, perhaps even because there MIGHT be something to his preaching and “we thought we’d come, just in case.” In much the same way some people have their child “christened” but have no connection, before or after, with the church, with the Word, or with the promises they made that day. It’s insurance, just in case there’s something to it: so also those who came to the water’s edge, just in case. John turns on them and says, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

And then, in anticipation of their reply to his initial challenge by saying: “We don’t need your kind of religion. After all, we’re the chosen ones, not you. We come from a long line of the covenanted faithful, whose pedigree is certainly better than yours. As a matter of fact, if we trace our ancestry back, eventually we’ll get to Abraham, that’s Father Abraham to you, and you can’t get a better pedigree than that! (Unless, of course, you’re related to Martin Luther, Ralph Loew, or John Buerk”)

John replied, “Don’t tell me that you are children of Abraham, because the God I know, the God YOU claim to be your God, this God, if he wanted to, he could make children of Abraham out of any rock you find by the road. So don’t go off thinking how special you are!”

Now he has their attention and so, deducing that perhaps he might have something to say that’s worth hearing, they ask, “What then should we do?”

Looking at the way he was dressed, looking at what was the evidence of a life lived in the wilderness, perhaps even looking into those eyes, full of passion and perhaps even a little crazy, they were expecting something radical. They were expecting something shocking. They were expecting, at least, something new; something different, something “out of the box” as they say. But, instead he said this:

If you have two coats, give one away.

If you have enough food and some to spare, share some.

If you’re tax collector, and tax collectors were notorious for raising the assessment and collecting more than city hall or the emperor required, because anything they could squeeze out of a client over what Rome demanded they collect, was theirs to keep. If you’re a tax collector, John said, collect only what the state allows. And if you’re a soldier, or anyone in a position of power over someone else for that matter, don’t abuse that power. If John were so speak to us today, he might say,

“If you’re a successful professional athlete, maybe even a golfer, and people, especially children look up to you and want to grow up to be like you and pin their aspirations on the fact that if you can make it so can I, then you have an obligation to keep your nose clean, to live a decent life, to care for people, to keep your promises.

If you’re a senator in our Congress, or the governor of a large State, like New York or Massachusetts, there are standards of behavior that you should observe, and you shouldn’t abuse your privilege to ship prostitutes across state lines, or try to sell a Senate seat, or disappear from your family and your duties to go have a little tryst off in South America.

He says to us,

- Don't cheat on your taxes,
- Drive less and when you do drive a more efficient car
- Give more money away
- Read more, watch television less and demand the truth from your sources.
- Pay more attention to your children

And wait for and look to God.

Those who came to hear him that day hoped for something else. What they got they already knew, but were reluctant to implement.

All I can do, John said, is point you in the right direction. You'll have to do the rest by yourselves. But it's worth doing, because the day will come, most likely at the end of your days, when before the throne of your Lord, or at the very least, in the privacy of your conscience, you'll have to account for what you've done, where you've been and what your motivation for living was. I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; and I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Amen