

**Luke 3:1-15** In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—<sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.<sup>3</sup> He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>4</sup> As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.<sup>6</sup> And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’”<sup>7</sup> John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?<sup>8</sup> Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.<sup>9</sup> The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”<sup>10</sup> “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.<sup>11</sup> John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”<sup>12</sup> Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”<sup>13</sup> “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.<sup>14</sup> Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”<sup>15</sup> The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.

From the General to the Specific

One of the greatest failures is keeping things general when we ought to be getting specific. How much of a sense of love do we withhold because our love is general rather than specific? How many needs people remain so because our sympathy never quite moves us into action? How many people have never learned about the love of Jesus Christ because, instead of talking about that, we have limited the conversation to religion in general, or to how bad things have gotten without bringing up the only sure solution of the Savior?

The hymn “On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry” was written a professor at the University in Paris got to the specific. He points to the same place as the lesson to a preacher who got quite detailed with people about the things godly people ought to be doing. That preacher was John the Baptist. John was needed in his day in the same way that we need precise, clear preaching today concerning our call to bring care and healing to a broken world.

This story from the Bible is impressive in this aspect. People were brought out of a mindset in which they seemed to be able to think only in generalities. The people were so moved by John’s preaching that they began asking specific questions, such as, “What shall we do?” John answered by pointing out definite ways in which they should change their behavior—ways that would also bring care and help to others. Moved by John’s call to repentance, they wanted to know how to serve God.

John told them that if they had two coats, they should give one to the person who had none. If they were blessed with more than enough to eat and drink, they should share the surplus with people who were going hungry. People in business were told specifically by John that they shouldn’t overcharge or cheat a customer. People must stop being so money-hungry that they devise shady ways of obtaining it, like fixing the books, cheating on taxes, lying about a product, or twisting someone’s arm. What’s marvelous is that John’s Advent message moved these people to the point that they wanted to know very specifically what their response to God’s call ought to be.

That is the way it always is with anything connected to the Gospel. The Gospel is very specific. The message of God’s love for us is not in gushy generalities. It is not just a bunch of words that sound religious. The Gospel is the Word of the Father, which took on specific form and flesh in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit’s work in reminding us of that Word. We do not have an absentee and obscure Savior, but rather a Savior who *became flesh and dwelt among us*” (John 1:14).

Our Savior's life was the most specific ministry the world has ever known. We could make endless lists of Jesus' definite acts of personal concern and deliverance. Jesus proclaimed God's love for the whole world and for each individual. In Jesus we see that God's love was always specific. Jesus heals specific people in specific ways. He forgives a woman of the night. He sits down at the table of a tax collector to eat. A widow's son is raised from the dead. He applies mud to the eyes of a blind man, who then sees. A demon who torments with self-destructive behavior is cast out at Jesus' command. One-on-one, Jesus applies his healing power.

Jesus continued the Father's work of rescue in a specific way. He suffered under Pontius Pilate. On the hill of Golgotha, Jesus allowed soldiers to nail his hands and feet to a cross. Then on the third day there was more than general talk about faith and love conquering all. We weren't left with a vague rumor about how the memory of Jesus would keep him alive, or how the spirit of his deeds would live on in the hearts of those who knew him. No, once again angels proclaimed him to be alive to unsuspecting witnesses. *He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him* (Mark 16:6). Later, those eyes saw a live Jesus.

Advent is the time to be catapulted out of the general. It's a time to get real about our salvation and about our calling in response to it. John the Baptist did that for his generation. He stood on the banks of the Jordan River, and he preached. The people heard him. They responded. They wanted to know specifically how they should change their lives in response to God's impending salvation. They wanted to know how people of the kingdom should act and what they should do. They moved from the general to the specific.

Here is our problem: we keep our love so disembodied that it usually amounts to little more than a bunch of words. We like to keep God's Word general, when in reality it speaks to each person quite pointedly. God knows the value of being specific, of putting words into concrete form. God himself took on the body of that baby in Bethlehem's manger. And as the Word made flesh, Jesus was always quite specific in how he demonstrated his universal love.

Talking about our hesitancy to get specific in serving God is exactly where a lot of us might find ourselves in the midst of this blessed Advent season. We're being swept away by a lot of the spiritual generalities of the season, basking in the glow of Christmas. We have no particular idea what we're going to do with the gifts and talents God has given us—no specific plans to witness to the Gospel by caring for those who need care. No plan for how we will be specific in our witness of the Savior.

In fact, when asked to contribute our gifts, most of us usually respond by replying, "What gifts?" "I just wish that I could do more." We have no clear idea which specific gifts God has given us because we have not tried very hard to exercise them in God's service. When you are interviewed for a job these days, you had better know exactly what job skills you possess and have experience in using, or the interviewer will walk away unimpressed. Advent is the time of God's job call to all Christians. The people responded to John by asking, **What shall we do?** Maybe our first question ought to be, "What specifically can I do to serve God in the spot God has placed me?" It can be more specific than a general go to church or pray.

As you continue to purchase gifts for others, we also need to spend some of our Advent days searching out and detailing the gifts God has given us. Then we can write him a thank-you note by using them in his service. For instance, do you have the gift of hospitality—the ability to extend a warm welcome to a stranger? Then use that gift to pay a visit to newcomer in our church. Do you make or bake things with your hands? A sick, injured, or homebound member would feel encouraged and specially loved if you could share with them. Has the Gospel of the Christ Child touched your heart and not been lost? Why not speak heart-to-heart with someone who does not know the Savior? Maybe it's time you specifically plan how God's true gift of Christmas will not get lost among the presents. The Gospel needs to be embodied and lived, even as God's love came to earth in body. No more generalities, please but faith-filled expression of the Gospel that Christ lived out among us—all the way to cross and resurrection.