

And the crowds asked him, “What, then, should we do?” ¹¹In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.

I grew up watching the classic cartoons, and in so many different series, there would be an episode in which a little angel and a little devil would be sitting on the cartoon characters’ shoulders, each whispering advice in the ear of the character. From the Smurfs to Tom and Jerry and even Homer Simpson, Fred Flintstone, Donald Duck and Sponge Bob SquarePants all had conversations with their shoulder angels and devils.

At this time of year, I think a lot of us are having conversations with the little voices that live on our shoulders. We wrestle with greed and generosity, vanity and humility, capitalism and compassion. Some of us wrestle with sobriety. Others with pride. There are lots of conversations to be had with our little shoulder friends.

I’ve been wrestling with my little voices lately. It’s the frenetic busyness of the season. Yesterday was the day of the year with the least daylight, and it certainly feels like

time is moving really quickly. Not enough hours at the office until the kids get home from school. Not enough hours between Sundays. There's just not enough hours left til Christmas. There's just so much to do!

No matter how many things I have yet to do, I love reading at night with the kids. My daughter, DJ, has been picking out one book in particular over and over again called Duck and Goose. It's about a duck and a goose who find an egg. They jealously fight over it at first but then decide to raise the baby together. It's funny and sweet, and the part I like best is when the egg starts to tremble and they think the baby is about to hatch and the duck (that's my part) runs around the egg yelling, "What should we do now!?! What should we do now?!" and the Goose (that's DJ's part) yells back, "We should remain calm!"

The Duck and Goose are like the cartoon angel and devil that sit on my shoulders. Duck is running around in circles yelling, "What should we do now? There's so much to do! So much to do! Did you edit the bulletins? Have the poinsettias been watered since they came in? Don't forget to go to the grocery store. I know you technically have food in the house, but you're out of the kids' favorite breakfast. And did you check in with the lady in the hospital today? And get the mail? And clean the litter box? And take the recycling to the curb? And when was the last time you bathed the kids? If you can't remember, do it tonight. After you unclog the toilet. And you should cut your son's nails, but remember, you can only do that while he sleeps by holding a flashlight in your mouth. And if you don't run the dishwasher tonight, there won't be any spoons tomorrow, and oh, the cat broke an ornament on the Christmas tree, so go find the superglue in the garage. And the kids need to wear Christmas themed pajamas to school, so make sure they're washed. But one of the kids just spilled their drink on the couch . . . you should go take care of that first."

And meanwhile, Goose keeps saying, "We should remain calm! Take a deep breath! Go sit down and hug your kids. Everything else can wait, except the couch. Go do the couch and then hug the kids."

But who can remain calm at this time of year? We are so busy right now doing what we assume we should be doing, what we're expected to be doing, what *has* to be done.

There's enough on my to-do list in a normal week. Feed the kids 6 times a day, bathe the kids, read to the kids, clean up after the kids. That's enough in itself, but at this time of year, when we're preparing for the arrival of Jesus, there's shopping, and more shopping, and cleaning, and decorating, and baking, shopping some more. We're prepping to host family or prepping to travel to go visit family. We prepped four church bulletins this week, and you're wrapping up work. We're scrambling to find last minute gift ideas for the hard to shop family member. We're keeping Amazon employees and robots frenetically busy.

I'm curious, how do you keep up with what you need to do? And how do you decide what comes first? Are there any list makers in the house of the Lord this morning? Do you have special post-it notes or a notebook for your to-do lists and groceries or do you put it in your smartphone?

And how many of you are still scrambling to get ready for Christmas? I understand going to the grocery store after church is kind of the norm here at D-triple C. Do you still have to go today to get the milk and bread and produce you need? Or do you have to go home and clean and prepare for guests? Or get the suitcase out of the attic to get ready to travel?

The list of things to do at this time of year is longer than the nice list that Santa has to carry around. It's a lot. We're short on daylight and waking hours. It's a busy time, and there's always something next on the list. The question, "What's next?" is always on my mind. What takes priority on the list of seven times seventy things that I need to take care of before Christmas Eve and the celebration of the arrival of Jesus.

So when I read the scripture text for today, I heard the question asked over and over again, "What, then, should we do?" and it resonated with me. John is telling people that the Messiah is coming. Someone so great that John didn't deserve to tie his sandals. And that was amazing because people were calling John a modern-day Elijah, which was a huge honor.

Others suggested *he* was the Messiah they had been waiting for, but John deflected their admiration. He said someone greater was coming, and they were asking how to prepare.

John was announcing the arrival of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and they wanted to know what they should do to be ready. It's a worthy question, and everybody in the crowd, including the tax collectors and soldiers wanted to know what they should do.

So, let me ask you, if you were expecting the arrival of important company, what might you do to prepare for their arrival? Wash the guest bedroom sheets? Lay out an extra towel and washcloth in the bathroom? You could ask what groceries your guest would prefer? What do they drink in the morning? Is there a special creamer or milk they prefer? Are they vegetarian or vegan or gluten free or do they have an allergy?

You might take extra care to clean up and take out the trash and wipe down the counter. You might vacuum your car and clean up the passenger seat. (Oh, man, I forgot to do that.) You might go so far as to bake their favorite treat or a dinner you know they'll like.

You'll clear your schedule so that you can be attentive and present, and you'll check to see what special events are happening and where. They might like to see the Stonington Lobster Pot tree or the Mystic Village lights. (See, I'm starting to get to know the area!)

John is telling the crowd that there's a special someone arriving. The Messiah is on the way, and the people, rightly, ask, "What should we do?" But do you notice, the answer is not, "Go to the store and get groceries. Go home and prepare a feast. Go clean the guest room and put on your best clothes."

The answer is, "If you have extra clothes, give some to those in need. If you have extra food, share that, too. If you have a job, do it honestly and don't cheat or bully those who are vulnerable. Be content with what you earn."

That's how you prepare for the arrival of our King. All the busyness that the world expects, all the pomp and circumstance that would be expected for any other royalty or dignitary, that's not as important to Jesus as righteousness and justice. Jesus is not asking for vain gestures or lavish hospitality. God did not send Jesus to be born in a palace with the

softest linen and shiniest marble floors. He wasn't expecting people dressed in stunning threads with the latest designer labels.

Jesus came so humbly. To prepare for his arrival, we're not expected to give him the finest hospitality or for us to have it all together. He's asking us to love one another and treat each other the way we want to be treated. If he arrives and the community is taking care of one another, that will please him.

There's another prophet who said nearly the same thing around eight hundred years earlier. The prophet Micah asks, what should I do to prepare for the presence of God? What should I buy? What should I bring? A young animal to offer as a sacrifice? Barrels of pure olive oil? What should I do to prepare for the greatness of God? And the answer is, "God has already told you what to do. It's not a secret. What the Lord requires of us to do is to do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with God."

Greatness is coming. We have just over 48 hours until Christmas Eve services begin. There's still time to prepare for the arrival of the Messiah. Listen to both the duck and the goose. We should be as excited as the duck and run around with genuine joy asking "What else can we do to prepare for Christmas Eve?" and we should remain as confident and calm as the goose who says, "We know what to do. Give a coat to JohnnyCakes. Give some food to the WARM Shelter. Advocate for the poor. Live within your means and be satisfied with what you have. Take deep breaths. Be as present as you can with the people around you. Love one another with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and when Jesus arrives, he'll be so pleased."

Anytime in life when the question is, "What should we do next?" the answer is, "Love." Amen.