

**Advent 3 C December 12, 2021**

**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Two Coats**

**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH**

Have you ever met someone who doesn't own a coat? I have. The first was a young woman from Hawaii who was a freshman when I was a senior at Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin. If you have trouble imagining where Wisconsin is on a map of the United States, it is one of the northern states. It is between the Mississippi River and Lake Michigan and directly beneath Lake Superior. It gets cold there in the winter and there is lots of snow. The small college town of Ashland is in Northern Wisconsin located on the shores of Lake Superior. It is beautiful any time of year, but for those who don't like winter, they can be long and cold there.

Therefore, I was surprised when a freshman showed up on campus without a coat. She had brought good boots, but what she had for a coat I would call a windbreaker, hardly enough to get through winter in the Northwoods. That's when I learned for where she came from, that windbreaker was the heaviest or warmest coat available. She quickly learned what was considered a winter coat in Hawaii was not going to keep her warm in Wisconsin.

Luckily for her, Northland College was used to helping students from around the world acclimate to Wisconsin winters. Through Residential Life, they provided vouchers for students from warmer climates who didn't have coats and took them to stores where they could pick out whatever coat they wanted. It was really enlightening for me to watch that freshman transform from being uncomfortable into realizing she could in fact handle the cold and she was free to discover the beauty and the fun that can be had in the winter. Who knew a coat could be an agent of liberation?

I thought of that young woman recently as I sat outside on the front porch of the church during my office hours on cold days and saw several people walking around without coats on. I suppose I could have been judgmental but instead I was curious, wondering if they were from warmer climates and thought the sweatshirts they had on would be warm enough. I thought about how new coats are expensive and observed it is not necessarily easy to find good winter coats here in Athens. And I thought about how both my husband and I have gone through physical changes over the past few years and had coats that no longer fit us while right there in front of me were people who didn't appear to have a coat. I heard John the Baptist's words from today's Gospel in my heart, "Those who have two coats must share with anyone who has none."

So, we packed up our coats and brought them into the church and we invited anyone else who has more coats than they need to do the same. With the help of a newer member, coats were hung on a rack and put in front of the church for anyone to take.

Before we were able to get the coats out, an international student stopped by CrossRoads Cafe while we were there. It was cold, and he had no coat. We asked if he needed one and explained our giveaway. He admitted he didn't have a coat, because he was from a warm country and couldn't buy one there. I watched him follow my husband into the church and return moments later wearing a coat that fit him perfectly. The mask on his face could not hide his tremendous smile.

In that moment I saw it again; that transformation from powerless to empowered. The simple act of sharing a coat was not charity because there was no pity, it was a form of liberation. It gave someone the freedom to acclimate to a climate much colder than they are used to, and perhaps even help them learn to love a place different from where they come from. There is genuine joy in that, perhaps steps toward equality too.

Maybe even fruits worthy of repentance, like John the Baptist spoke of in today's Gospel. I know at first it doesn't look like today's Gospel fits with the theme of joy and rejoicing we heard in the first lesson and is what the pink candle we lit today in the Advent Wreath represents. But I also wonder if we have the wrong idea about joy. We assume it is an intensely blissful form of happiness. But I'm not so sure. The theological definition of joy is recognizing our connection with God, which means joy is something that can be sensed or felt even during times when we feel sad or angry or frustrated or cold.

Last week's Gospel reading introduced us to John as a prophet. In this week's Gospel reading we get to hear John speak for himself, and he has a lot to say. His message is much like the prophets of old; calling people to repent, to no longer rely on the reputation of their ancestors for salvation, but to be accountable for their own sins and change their ways. This is how to prepare for the Savior who is coming, by admitting we cannot save ourselves.

This is why John's message is good news. He named several ways we human beings harm each other, take advantage of each other, extort, and abuse each other, that eventually lead to a corrupt society. To those who are on the receiving end of such abuse, the news that a Savior is coming who can transform such pain into liberation, who will empower and equip all people to live in the world as equals is good news. It's also good news to those who might not realize the harm they are causing, because it invites a change of heart.

When we share a coat with those who don't have any, we aren't giving charity by giving someone something they don't need or putting ourselves above others in order to feel superior to them. We aren't wallowing in the nostalgia of the glory days of the church of the past. We are being the church in the present time by being present with our neighbors right now. It is a small way we can with our actions show our belief that Christ has come, and Christ will come again. And that brings much needed joy to the world, even if it just one shared coat or act of kindness and generosity at a time.