

Sermon Title: Making the Crooked Straight
Text: Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6
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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
Second Sunday of Advent

I'm sure you've noticed the seeming explosion of Christmas decorations. I don't know if it's a function of television and newspaper coverage, and the deep longing of the human spirit for its 15 minutes of fame, or it's some sort of conspiracy between hardware and home stores and the electric company to juice up profits a little bit every December—to get their own piece of the Christmas pie—but what formerly consisted of a wreath hung on the door, and maybe a candle in the upstairs window or a string of lights outlining the picture window in the living room has grown to the most amazing proportions. I'm told that for a price the same services that will cut your lawn in the summer and trim your trees in the winter will come in November with their cherry pickers and transform your house into the next internet phenomenon.

It's fun, I'll admit, though some really have gone a bit over the top, and these blow up lawn decorations can be downright spooky, especially if you happen to drive by in the middle of the day when the power is out and there's a poor deflated Rudolph or Frosty, or (yes, I've seen them) Homer Simpson in a Santa suit, looking more like the Wicked Witch of the West taking a shower than a harbinger of Christmas joy. What I'm not sure about is just what they say about us, and just where our heads are at as we continue our march through Advent.

I talked with my friend Bob from Minnesota this week (actually I'm hopeful that he'll come and share a Sunday with us in the Spring, to help us in our continuing conversation of the shape of the church in this 21st century) but he reminded me that it wasn't so terribly long ago that the run up to Christmas was a far more modest thing. We were talking about sanctuary colors, actually, and how the catalogs have pretty much convinced pastors and sanctuary committees around the world that we need two separate sets of paraments: purple for Lent and *blue* for Advent.

Bob's a history buff, and he reminds me that when the church first started putting shape to the church year, when Christmas and Easter first became proper celebrations in the life of the church—no, they were not celebrated from day one!—and as colors and fabrics were introduced into worship, there was only purple...a reminder that the preparation for the birth of the savior required every bit of the fast that was necessary for a good Christian to prepare for his passion. Lutefisk, Bob noted, was what every good Norwegian had to eat on Christmas Eve because it was the last night of the holy fast, and when Christians fasted, they ate *fish*. In that desolate tundra, the only way to assure there would be any left was to soak it in lye and drench it in salt, but that was okay, because you weren't *supposed* to enjoy it!

Even my father recalled—though I'm not entirely sure if his interest was in historical accuracy or a deep desire to put off to tomorrow what could be done today—that in his childhood there was no Christmas tree in the house until after they went to bed on Christmas Eve. Then Grandma and Grandpa would shift into whatever the 1920's version of hyper-drive was in order to transform the sitting room into a Christmas wonderland overnight. If I've got my history straight we really have Macy's and Gimbles' to thank for the fact that Jolly Old Saint Nick's "Ho, Ho, Ho!" and "Have you been naughty or nice" drown out the voice we heard crying out from our Gospel lesson this morning.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God!” There’s a transformation at the heart of the preparation for this season that goes so far beyond window decorations and ornaments hung to hide the bare spots, a call that goes beyond climbing up into the attic to haul down last year’s boxes, or a run to the store to buy a new string of lights. In the cry of the Baptist we’re reminded that it’s not just a view out my living room window, or down my street, but a cosmic transformation that is required, if we’re really going to see what’s going on when finally we trudge through the streets of Bethlehem, and find the stable out back, where Mary and Joseph are elbowing chickens and cows and eeking out a space for the Savior of the Nations, come to free us from our sins.

Holiness is the terribly old fashioned word that was set at the end of the Advent road for believers: as Paul prayed for the church in Philippi, “That in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.” And to be perfectly honest, it is not one of my favorite words in the Christian lexicon, mainly, I suppose, because it’s been pretty well drummed into this Presbyterian and Reformed brain of mine that “perfection is not a thing to be grasped”—that it is a fundamental quirk of my human person and personality that try as I might, I will never manage to be “pure and blameless”. I can try hard, and every now and then I can do some good in this world, but blameless I will never be. I can work on my faults, scrub at the stains I know spot my soul, but not even Ivory Soap is pure. I do fully understand the impetus for this season. We’ll do our best, but then, if we hang a little garland and add a few little lights, can’t it be good enough? If being Holy means being perfect, then I might just as well give up right now, because try as I might, my good Calvinist roots cry out, I will *never* succeed.

The problem, I suspect, is that I’ve taken Paul, and John the Baptist, just a bit too literally. I’ve made the mistake of thinking that the actions that are needed if the promise of this season is to be fulfilled fall squarely on my shoulders...yet one more thing to be done. But the story that waits for us just around the corner really does make a very different claim. Think of where they’re at right now, Mary and Joseph, as they make their way across the hill country from Nazareth to Bethlehem. A middle aged carpenter and his teenaged bride. If there’s a scene further from perfect, I have trouble imagining what it might be.

The land of God’s promise is occupied by Romans who have insisted that all the people be enrolled, not because old Caesar has a great party planned for them all, but because he wants to be sure that all the taxes are paid in full. Mary, Joseph’s betrothed is “with child” as they say, and though Mary and her cousin Elizabeth have wondered some wondrous things about what this all means, it could not have been good news for old Joe, who not only will have one more mouth to feed when it’s all said and done, but who will have to come up with *some* way of explaining this baby’s birthday when people come smirking around his shop.

No, perfect is not the right adjective to describe this scene. But this *is* the story of a God who seems, almost without fail, to like best using crooked lines to draw straight. If “Perfect” is not quite the right word, then maybe *Holy* is. But we’ll have to understand just what that word *holy* really means.

Begin with the realization that at the end of the day, if the biblical witness is to be trusted, there is only One who is Holy, and that One is God. “Holy is the Lord, and greatly to be praised” is the base note that runs throughout Scripture, beginning with that first step out into the void and ending with the chorus that sings in the New Jerusalem. The creation that issues from God’s command is *good*, to be sure, even *very good*. But Holy it is not, because God alone is holy.

So if there is any holiness in this world into which we have been cast, it is not innate, or even less the result of our strivings. If there is holiness in our lives it can be only that we have somehow managed to reflect the glory of God that has been revealed to us. The psalmist guides us in understanding when we sing, “The heavens are telling” not their own grandeur, or goodness, but “the glory of God!” The goal, the end and telos of our human living is not to somehow become glorious in and of ourselves, but to manage, as we are, to catch some of God’s glory in our humble lives, and joyously reflect that goodness in the world around us. How else could it be that a stable in Bethlehem occupied by a worn carpenter, his nervous bride, and some lunking shepherds, should be called *Holy*? It’s not the ingredients, but the hand that has caught them up, and shaped them, and filled them, that makes them a story that has been told for two thousand years.

If we long for holiness, then, in all likelihood we too must search, not in the tinsel and glitter of a season that seems mostly to have lost itself in gratuitous consumption, but in the wondrous possibility that the light we long to catch and reflect in the world around us comes into our midst in out of the way places, in silent nights and in humble surroundings. We need to find ways, in these weeks of the Advent journey, to slow down a little bit, and realize that the landscape we’re treading is not the one that’s shouted out to us from television ads and department store circulars, but when what we thought was a valley of despair is filled up, and when we find a way of wading through the mountains of distractions, bringing them low enough that we can see beyond their peaks the neighbor who longs for our touch. The light of holiness we seek may as well come from the stranger we pass on the street as from all the glowing strands of colored lights all run together.

You see, the real secret of holiness is, I think, captured, not in the valleys or in the hills, but in that last word of the Baptist’s cry: we’re moving mountains and filling valleys because what we long for demands a level place where all of us together can behold the saving arms of God stretched out toward us in that distant angel’s song. The light of our salvation cannot shine where we’ve built walls and fortresses to protect and divide us, each from each other. It is not for *me* that a child is born, a son is given...it is for *us*.

My deepest fear in the breathless run that will fill most of our days for the next few weeks is that what it really does is cut us off, each from the other, when the real core of the Fast—be it Lent or Advent—is its ability to bring us *together*. Because in the end, the holiness we seek will not be found when we are somehow set apart from all creation, but when we find our place within it—when we’re just at that point, that our souls can catch the light of God’s love slipping into this world.

It’s one of my favorite parts of the worship we will join at the end of this Advent, when we gather on Christmas Eve and hear the story told once more. We’ll set the lights low, and taking a

candle's light from the center of this Advent wreath, we'll pass it, one to the other, until all the room is aglow. The only way it can happen is that somehow each of us, in all the haste and worry, have somehow managed to find our way right back here, together, forming a community with a common longing, and a common hope.

This is where our Advent longing will end, because it is *here, together* that our holiness will be revealed. The crooked way will be made straight, and the mountains brought low, the valleys filled and the rough ways smooth, not by anything we can do for ourselves, but only by what God can do *for* us. And *all* of us, together, will, if we try really hard, catch a glimpse of the truth for which we long: the saving love of God, born in our midst.

Let us pray.