

Living between the Steps

Luke 3:1-6

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2015]

I

On October 17, 1989, the city of San Francisco was struck by a powerful earthquake.

Huge cracks appeared in the walls of Candlestick Park, where thousands of fans were waiting for the start of the third game of the World Series.

Sections of freeway buckled and collapsed, killing dozens of people.

At least twenty-seven fires broke out across the city;
the largest, in the Marina District, consumed dozens of buildings.

At the edge of the Marina District, a crowd of people gathered to watch the firefighters as they battled the flames.

After a few minutes, a police officer came up to the crowd and began shouting:

"What have you come to look at?" he said to them. "This is no time to be standing around. There's been an earthquake. You all have work to do! Go home. Fill your bathtubs with water (if you still have water). Prepare yourselves to live for the next few days without electricity. The sun's going to set in another hour; your time is running out. The firefighters will do their job here: Now you go home and do yours!"

That police officer spoke truth,
as John the Baptist spoke truth.

That officer spoke with urgency,
as John the Baptist spoke with urgency.

His message, like John's, was what the people needed to hear.

And what is the message we need to hear,
in these ever-darkening days of Advent?

Is it a message of spending and partying and conspicuous consumption?

Or is it a message of repentance and forgiveness and faithfulness?

II

On the second Sunday of Advent we find ourselves back in the wilderness hearing the strange message of John the Baptist.

But did you notice the way Luke introduces the story of John?

Why is Luke so preoccupied with this detailed survey of Roman and Jewish political and religious leaders as he prepares to bring John center stage?

The list includes the Emperor Tiberius himself,
four regional governors—
the two most prominent being Herod in Galilee
and Pontius Pilate in Judea—
and two Jewish high priests,
Annas and Caiaphas.

These are more than historical markers.

These are men of power and influence who will play a role in the gospel story that is to follow.

Luke has set the stage for an earth-shaking event that is about to unfold.

God's messenger is coming,
caustic, like a refiner's fire or fuller's soap,
to purify God's people so that they can serve him rightly.

That promise had been made four hundred years earlier by the prophet Malachi.

The Jewish people had returned from exile,
reoccupied Jerusalem,

rebuilt the temple,
and then fallen into the routines of life under Persian rule.

By Malachi's day, the deliverance from Babylonian exile was a distant memory.

The notion of God breaking into their world seemed as remote then as now,
when indifference and cynicism to the presence of God in daily life is the
norm in all but political speeches,
God is relegated to the realm of the private, "spiritual" side of life,
and most of us live decidedly secular lives.

It is in just such a context that the messenger Malachi foretold appears.

And what is his message?

The long-awaited Messiah is coming.

Prepare the way.

Make his path straight.

Repent and be baptized.

John calls on the people to rise out of their lethargy
and submit their ways to God's ways,
their priorities to God's priorities,
their ethics to God's ethics,
their purposes to God's purpose.

III

And so we, too, are called to prepare the way of the Lord,
to make his paths straight these four weeks before Christmas.

For most of us, Advent is a season of preparation both here and everywhere else.

There are presents to be bought and wrapped,
homes to be decorated,
Christmas cards to be mailed,
parties to be gone to and given.

It is a season of remembrance and reunion,
as children come home from school,
parents plan holiday visits,
old friends stop by to wish us Merry Christmas
and Happy New Year.

It is a season of homecoming,
and if your home looks anything like mine,
there is work to be done.

There are baseboards that need vacuuming
and the guest bathroom that needs painting.

There is the carpet that needs to be cleaned
and the curtains that need to be washed and rehung.

There are windows to be washed and floors to be moped.

There is a lot of work to be done, and I'm not looking forward to it.

But I know from experience that I will feel better when it's done.

Not only that, but my house will not only look better but feel better to me.

You see, I have this theory, that when you clean house the molecules rearrange themselves.

I can't prove it, but I know for a fact that when my house is clean,
it feels more like home—
more warm and welcoming and inviting.

I have given my home my loving care,
and in return it purrs with satisfaction
as a place I am glad to welcome guests.

IV

Is this something you can relate to?

If so, then you know what John the Baptist is talking about,
because he is saying the same thing in this morning's gospel lesson—

only the house that concerns him is the house of our souls.

Vacuum your hearts, he says, and dust off your minds.

Wash the windows through which you perceive your God
and make the paths straight,
because God is on the way to stay with you.

In the words of Eleanor Farjeon's Advent hymn:

*People, look east, the time is near
Of the crowning of the year.
Make your house fair as you are able;
Trim the hearth and set the table.
People look east and sing today:
Love, the Guest, is on the way.*

Prepare the way of the Lord, says John.

Prepare a place that is ready to receive him,
and one in which you are glad to welcome him.

When John the Baptist first preached this message,
most of his hearers knew what he was talking about.

It was the custom in those days for monarchs to send couriers ahead of them on
their journeys—

to check out the roads and warn the locals to get to work,
smoothing out the ruts and patching the potholes—
because the king was on his way.

John was the messenger sent to warn everyone who would listen...

to clean house,
to pave roads,
to prepare for the Lord's arrival.

It was an exciting message:

the Lord was coming to be with his people,
and everyone would get a chance to see him.

Like when Pope Francis came to New York City and Philadelphia and people waited hours just for a glimpse of His Holiness.

God was coming to the people—
 not as a pillar of fire
 or an earthquake
 or a wind
 or a still small voice
 but as Savior.

V

And what could be better news than that?

Maybe it was not what John said, but how he said it.

Repent! he said, and be baptized.

 Change your ways, and let me wash you off
 so that the outside of you matches the inside of you,
 which has been wiped clean of sin.

Repent! he said, and you can guess that his hearers felt about the same way you do when you hear that word.

Repent!

The very sound of it conjures up images of revival tents, the sawdust trail, Elmer Gantry, all those billboards along the highways that read:

Jesus Is Coming, Perhaps Today. Are You Ready?

Repent!

Contemplate all the ways you have broken your dear savior's heart,
 confess your wickedness and plead for forgiveness,
 pray to be delivered from the torments of hell
 which you so richly deserve.

Repent!

Prepare the way of the Lord,
 and never mind that the road is paved with fear,
 with despair
 and, above all, with guilt.

Repent and be saved!

Where did the good news go?

What happened to the welcome home party?

What started out as a celebration has become a wake.

Those who were craning their necks for a glimpse of their savior have become preoccupied with their sins instead.

Somehow we got the idea that what the Lord most wants from us is to hear how sorry we are,
 and how we will try to do better from now on.

We have gotten repentance all mixed up with remorse,
 and we dread the holy visitor we set out to welcome.

VI

You may quote me: **Repentance has nothing to do with feeling sorry—
 about yourself or for yourself.**

Repentance is not a matter of listing all the things you wish you had not done in your life and feeling badly about them,
 as if you could dilute them somehow with your regrets.

Repentance is not about wishing you were a better person
 or keeping track of your faults,
 as if God might be persuaded to overlook them
 if only you could convince God that you are really,
 really,
 really,
 really sorry.

There is an old story about the evangelist who concluded his fiery sermon on sin by asking everyone in the congregation who wanted to go to heaven to stand up.

A few of them did, mostly children and grandparents plus a couple of Sunday school teachers.

Then he asked all those who did not want to go to hell to stand up,
and everybody else got to their feet.

Repentance is not about avoiding God's wrath.

Nor is it an intellectual exercise, where you make an objective survey of your good and bad points and come up with a comprehensive self-improvement plan.

Repentance is not deciding to be nicer,
or more generous,
or more spiritual;
it is not, for that matter, something that is under our control.

As much fuss as we make in the Christian church about the need for repentance,
in the end it is more something that happens to you
than something you decide.

Repentance is when you come home from a camping trip where you carried all that you needed on your back,
or from a trip to another country where children are thin and go barefoot—
repentance is that moment when you walk through the front door of your house and everything looks different to you.

Your living room is like a museum, filled with such lovely and unnecessary things.

Your kitchen overwhelms you with its three sets of dishes and food enough for weeks.

Your closet is so full of clothes you wonder how you ever decided you needed them all.

You are rich as Midas and you don't even know it.

You have so much more than you need that you start figuring out how you can give it away.

Repentance is when you wake up in the middle of the night with a pain, or a lump, or a fever,

and while you lie there wondering whether it is something or nothing,
your life begins to look different to you.

You begin to count the people whom you love and who love you,
and to think about all the things you meant to do as soon as you had time.

Whether you have ten days to live or ten thousand,
you decide to *take* the time and to make every moment count.

Repentance is when you have your life set—
your career established,
your retirement fully funded,
your daily routine streamlined for maximum comfort and efficiency—
and someone else comes into your life:
an elderly parent,
a sick friend,
a spouse,
a child.

And all of a sudden everything looks different.

One way of life dissolves before your eyes and another takes its place,
a life in which you are intimately involved with another human being.

Whether you are loving it or hating it,
you have the sneaking suspicion that it is why you were born,
and that it is the only thing in the world worth doing.

VII

As I prepared this sermon, I came across a story about a Vietnam veteran named Ralph.

The teller of the story was a professor at a university who had been invited to speak at a military base in the month of December.

Ralph had been sent to meet him at the airport, and after they had introduced themselves, they headed toward the baggage claim.

All the way down the concourse, the professor said, Ralph kept disappearing:
 first to help an older woman whose suitcase had fallen open,
 then to lift two toddlers up to where they could see Santa Claus,
 and again to give directions to someone who was lost.

Each time Ralph came back with a big smile on his face and picked up the conversation where he had left off.

The professor could not figure him out.

"Where did you learn to do that?" he asked Ralph when he came back for the third time.

"Do what?" Ralph said

"Where did you learn to live like that?"

"Oh," Ralph said, "during the war, I guess," and over the course of the next hour or so he told the professor about his tour of duty in Viet Nam...
 about how it was his job to clear mine fields...
 and how he watched one friend after another blown up before his eyes.

"I learned to live between steps," he said. "I never knew whether the next one would be my last, so I learned how to get everything I could out of the moment between when I picked up my foot and when I put it down again.

"Every step I took, it was a whole new world, and I guess I've just been that way ever since."

VIII

Brothers and sisters, **repentance means learning to live between the steps.**

It means a complete turnaround,
 a change of course,
 a change of heart and mind and life.

Repentance is too busy redeeming the present to apologize for the past.

Repentance gives more energy to loving the good than to hating the bad.

Repentance is a matter of being captured by God,
so that everything looks different,
so that you lose your old bearings
and are offered new ones instead.

That, of course, is God's part in the process.

Our part is to have the good sense to say "thank you" instead of "no" or "not yet,"
and to learn how to steer by those new lights
instead of scrambling to return to our old, familiar ones.

It is not something that happens only once.

Life is full of such turning points, both large and small:
moments when we are offered a new way of looking at things,
a new place to stand,
a new direction to take.

After the storm has passed,
the fever has gone,
the baby has been toilet trained,
the war is over,
the earth has stopped shaking,
it is easy to forget how different everything looked for a while,
how changed,
how brand new and wide open.

So lucky for us that the Lord is coming,
the Lord...who has more such moments up his sleeve
than we can ever imagine or count.

Repent! John says, Change!

It is less a message of judgment than of grace,
an invitation to be lifted up and turned around
to face the One who is on the way.

So clean the house of your heart!

Sweep the front steps of your soul...

understanding that the One who began a good work in you
will bring it to completion at the day of his coming.

**Welcome the Loving Guest who comes
to prepare in each of us
a home he can call his own.**

Amen.

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