

Born to Set Thy People Free

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

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The Second Sunday of Advent

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A young man approached the foreman of a logging crew and asked for a job. "Well, that depends," replied the foreman. "Can you fell a tree?"

The young man stepped forward, shouldered his ax, and skillfully felled a large tree. Impressed the foreman said, "Young man, you can start Monday."

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday rolled by. The young man worked as hard as he could. Thursday afternoon the foreman approached the young man and said, "You can pick up your check on the way out today."

Confused the young man said, "I thought you paid on Friday."

"Normally we do," the foreman explained. "But we're letting you go today because you've fallen behind. Our daily production charts show that you've dropped from first on Monday to last today."

The young man objected, "But I'm a hard worker. I'm the first to arrive in the morning, the last to leave in the evening, and I even work through my lunch break."

The foreman, sensing the young man's integrity, thought for a moment and then asked, "Have you sharpened your ax?"

"No, sir," the young man replied. "I've been working too hard to take time for that."

That happens this time of year, doesn't it? Shopping to do. Parties to attend. Year-end projects to complete. Special meals to cook. Another sermon to prepare. We're chopping and chopping, working as

hard as we can, felling as many trees as we can, but we're not taking time to "sharpen the ax," time to be still, to listen deeply to one another, to be grateful, and to ponder the wonderful story we celebrate this month.

That's why we have Advent. Advent is an invitation to sit down and sharpen the ax, to light a candle and consider its mystery, sing a carol and be transported by its familiarity, to be aware that 2,000 years ago a baby was born. That baby grew into a man who offered the world's greatest teachings. That man finally gave his life to prove the truth of his teachings.

Advent is an invitation to prepare. That is John the Baptist's role in Advent. He calls us to prepare the way. John was a rather odd wilderness dweller who wore camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey. John the Baptist was a voice, a voice in the wilderness that cried out the words of the prophets Isaiah and Malachi,

*Prepare the way of the Lord,
Make his paths straight.
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.*

Originally those words called the people to prepare for the arrival of a new king. So straighten out the paths upon which his chariot will travel. Fill-in the gullies. Smooth the bumps and potholes. Let us be prepared for the arrival of our new king.

And so it is with Christmas and all the other deep experiences of faith. The more we prepare the more meaningful they will be. So I invite you to consider doing these three things to prepare for Christmas.

First, make straight your path. Traveling on the Blue Ridge Parkway is much slower than traveling on I-40. Kelly and I decided to take the Blue Ridge Parkway once. It was beautiful, of course. But soon Kelly started getting carsick from all the curves. And I realized we were only averaging about 38 miles per hour. We decided that if our intention was to travel smoothly and efficiently, the interstate was a better option.

Sometimes we have curves in our lives that slow us down. A family squabble that remains unresolved can do that. It's always sitting in the background, a curve in your road that slows you down. Is this the year to straighten out that path? Maybe it's a health issue you refuse to admit. A problem at work. Anger with a son or daughter. Some curve in your life that is slowing you down. We would be better prepared for the arrival of a king if we made straight our paths.

Second, make your rough way smooth. Sometimes we do things that make our way more difficult. We choose to take revenge on a co-worker. We know it's going to explode and make things worse, but we do it anyway. We drink too much. We eat too much. Exercise too little. We pray too little. We do things that make for a rough way rather than a smooth way. Is this the year to address that? We would be better prepared for the arrival of a king if we made our rough way smooth.

And third, open your eyes and hearts to see the salvation of God. It is all around us. Acts of grace. Miracles of love. People who really understand the things that matter most in life.

I read this story this past week. I don't know if it is true or not. I hope it is. It's about a group of students doing a class project together. Their assignment was to list what they thought were the present "Seven Wonders of the World." They came up with more than seven, of course, so they placed them in the order of the number of votes they got. Here's their list of the "Seven Wonders of the World":

1. The Great Pyramids of Egypt
2. The Grand Canyon
3. The Taj Mahal
4. The Panama Canal

5. The Empire State Building
6. St. Peter's Basilica
7. The Great Wall of China

While the teacher gathered the votes, she noticed that one student was still working on her list. So she asked the girl if she was having trouble. The girl replied, "Well, yes, a little. I couldn't make up my mind because there are so many."

The teacher said, "Why don't you tell us what you have, and maybe the rest of us can help."

The girl hesitated and then read her list of the "Seven Wonders of the World":

1. To see
2. To hear
3. To touch
4. To taste
5. To feel
6. To laugh
7. To love

The things that matter most in life. The miracles of God that abound, that surround us every day. Some do see them. We would be better prepared for the arrival of a king if we opened our hearts to see the salvation of God.

So let's sharpen our ax. Let us be prepared for the arrival of the King. Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free.

Closing Prayer

Prince of Peace, teach us to be still, to find a kneeling place within our hearts, that we may see the salvation of God. Amen.