

Turned Around... One Step At A Time – December 6, 2009 – 2nd Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 40: 1-2; 6b – 11; Luke 3: 1-14

I am often entertained by hearing all the reasons – and they're not reasons, mostly, they're excuses – why people won't – **or don't** - go to church.

“Everybody there is a bunch of hypocrites”... To which I reply, not out loud, but in my inside voice... “And how is church any different from where you work - or the place where you play golf or where you go have coffee?” And to which I might add - not out loud, but, again, with my inside voice - “The church is full of hypocrites? Then you should feel right at home.”

“The worship there is boring... same ole music, same ole prayers... There's nothing to do there... You offer nothing for the kids, for the teens, for the babies”... To which I reply - not out loud, but in my inside voice - “The church is not an amusement park or a movie theater. The church is not a concert hall. The church is not a food court or for that matter any other part of the local mall. The church does not exist so that you may be distracted or entertained. The church does not exist to serve each and every one of your needs.

The church, however, exists for you to intentionally and prayerfully grow in grace so that you may serve God, so that you may glorify God, all in the light of the gift you have been given – the gift of salvation...and the joy that salvation brings.

“The church is always using its money to help the poor and the needy!”

To which I might reply in my outside voice, “Yes, we do, and we also visit the sick, the lonely, those in prison. And we also help people who need clothing and shelter. And we also are advocates for those who are struggling to live in oppressive or hurtful places, whether that place is a country or a workplace or their home. We do these things because Jesus told us to do these things.

“You never come to visit me...or my family. You're always off visiting someone in the hospital or someone in crisis. You never just come for a regular visit. How can I know if I want to go to your church if I don't know something about you?”... To which I answer, first with just my inside voice... “First of all, it's not my church; and, by the way, it's not yours either, even if your Daddy and Granddaddy and Great Granddaddy built and paid for every inch of the building. **It's God's church** and I can only hope and pray that you don't come to church based on who's standing behind the pulpit.”

“And I don't come to visit to be interviewed or looked over; and I don't come to visit to sell the church to you or to anyone else. The Gospel speaks for itself. It does not need to be sold and it should not be sold. And, yes, I do visit first those who are in the greatest need.”

And here is where I may speak out loud - and mean every word... “I do my best to meet each need. I can't say that I succeed each time, but I try. And yes, I do mean to visit you and get to know you better.”

And finally this one...”**You preachers do nothing but judge others, tell us what to do, and tell us where we’ve gone wrong. I don’t mind a good sermon now and then, but in your preaching, preacher, and in your pastoring, pastor, you’ve long ago stopped preaching and have gone to meddling.**”

To which I answer out loud - and right now - not in my inside voice but in a voice that I hope you all can hear. “My task is never to judge, never to scold, not to push, not to nag. My task – my call – is to do what it says in the bulletin each week – **to proclaim God’s Word... to proclaim the Good News.**”

That task will quite likely mean that I will from time to time call – **all of us** – and that means **all of us** - to account and to call us to repentance ... for all of the ways we fall short of God’s glory...

For the shabby ways we deal with each other... for the meanness – that is to say, the smallness of our lives... For all the inventive and creative ways that we find to indulge in those sins that are deadly to our souls and destructive of our daily lives – including and especially those seven deadly sins...

Such as **Gluttony** (or the love of appetite)... and **lust** (or the love of pleasure)... and **avarice** (or the love of money)... and **wrath**, or anger (or the reckless and unchecked love of our ideas and feelings and our sense that we are right, so much so that we feel no restraint in venting our anger and our temper on others)...

And there is **envy** (or the love of our well being to such an extent and to such an extreme that we want to deprive others of their well-being)... and **sloth, or the ancient Christian term, acedia** – (where we have lost the love of life and have lost track of our blessings) - and finally, **pride**, the source of all of our sinning... pride, an excessive love of our selves and thus an absence of love for God or for others.

Part of my call, as both pastor and preacher – is to hold this mirror – the Bible... the Word of God... to our daily lives and to see and to show what the mirror reveals... to shine a spotlight on those disordered desires that have so disordered our lives.

In the passage we heard this morning from Isaiah, God speaks and says, “All people are grass; and the grass withers and the flower fades, but God’s Word stands forever.”

My task is to proclaim God’s Word from three pulpits on Sunday and to lean on God’s Word on every day that follows. In other words, from this pulpit and on your front porch and in your parlor... from this pulpit... and in our phone calls... from this pulpit and in official meetings, in planned and unplanned visits, in church and out, **my task – my call** – is not to utter or whisper sweet nothings – but rather, to do some Bible led meddling, both in word and in deed.

It is often an unpleasant and thankless task; but it is also, after all is said and done, **an act of grace.**

For I, like all pastors, carry on in some way, the work of John the Baptist, which is, simply, **to prepare the way of the Lord**... to make all of us ready to meet Jesus; to call each and every one of us to repent... that is to say, to turn ourselves around, **completely around**, even if it takes one step at a time.

My task and my call is to help each of us, somehow, through the grace of God, to become free from the briar patches - **the painful briar patches** - we sometimes find ourselves in... to lessen the distance that we feel from God... to lessen the distance **we are, in fact, from God**; and to find some way where once in awhile we can actually remember who we are and whose we are.

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In this morning's Gospel passage, we read that John "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Luke the Gospel writer cites the passage from Isaiah that we see in this morning's words of greeting that tells us that as we prepare the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus - and that is what we are doing today... and that is what we do each Advent season - "the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places smoothed out into a gentle plain."

Friends, the world – our world, our lives - must be made ready for Jesus; or the world will not ever know him. Our hearts must be made ready – our hearts must be opened – for the coming of Jesus, for how else will we be able to receive Him?

In this passage from Luke, John calls the people who have gathered at the river Jordan to "Bear fruits worthy of repentance"... "for, John says," there is someone coming who is more powerful than I am... and He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John's words sound like words of judgment...they may even sound like a scolding... **they may even indicate that John has moved from preaching and has gone to meddling**

But what John was calling the people to do then is what we are called to do today: to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord Jesus so that we may see Him, so that we may receive Him, and so that we may follow Him.

Listen to what the people in the crowd ask John and see how he answers.

"What must we do?" the crowd asks John. "What must we do to turn our lives around?"

Here are John's replies:

- If you have an extra coat, share the coat with someone who doesn't have a coat.
- If you have some extra food, share that too.
- To the tax collectors who came forward, "Collect only the amount owed – and no more."
- To the soldiers who sought a new life, "Be satisfied with your pay and don't shake anyone down for more money"

Simple things, really... You don't have to fast for forty days. You don't have to go on some long pilgrimage or retreat. There are no books or pamphlets to read or study. There is no check to write to the newest TV evangelist...

You don't have to give all your money away, just what you can give to those who need it. You don't have to quit your job and go off into the wilderness. You just have to do your job well and do it fairly...

Don't steal... don't bully people...share with others what you can... be thankful for what you have.

These are the only requirements that John gives for those who have come to repent, who desire to turn their lives around. For that is what repentance means – **to turn our lives around – completely around** - one step at a time: to become yet again the people that God created us to be and meant us to be by doing those little things... those little things that lead us slowly but surely back to God.

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Here is a ridiculously, and yet deceptively simple equation to help us better understand God’s grace-filled work in our lives...

When you are sick – when you have a cold or the flu or a virus in your body, **you feel miserable.**

When your health improves, when the flu bug begins to leave your system, **you feel better.**

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Now, let’s move that equation to our daily lives.

When we do bad things... when we engage in bad or self-indulgent or hurtful or selfish or self-centered behavior, **we feel miserable. Don’t we? Do we not think, can we not concede that when we are making other people in our lives miserable, the one who feels the most miserable is us?**

And when our habits and our behavior improves, even if it is just a little, even if we cut down our mean-spiritedness or our selfishness a fraction, even if we do just one or two acts of kindness, intentional or not, **we feel better!** And on those rare days, when we are a ever-present source and fountain of loving kindness, generosity of spirit, and deep compassion, **we actually feel good.**

And friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus wants us to feel good. Jesus wants us to experience the joy of being saved, of being restored to our right senses, of being and becoming the people we were meant to be.

Psalm 51... go to it, if you please. It’s in your hymnal on pages 785 and 786. Go to page 786 and let us read together just three verses – verses 10-12. And instead of the word me, let’s use the word “us.” Let’s stand and read this...

Create in us a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within us.

Cast us not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from us.

Restore to us the joy of your salvation; and sustain in us a willing spirit.”

“Restore to us the joy of your salvation.”

This is a season of joy, to be certain, but I am here to tell you that this is also uniquely a season of sadness... of desperation... of brokenness... of old grievances – old wounds – that we take out each season so that we can pick at them again... Believe me, this is true.

“Restore to us the joy of your salvation.”

Those three verses that we just read together is one of my daily prayers. I hope – and I pray - that you make it your prayer. Or at least make part of the prayer about joy your prayer. **We need to reclaim that joy.** And the source of our joy comes in our being saved, in our being restored to the people God created us to be.

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Let's go back to that simple equation... When you do better, you feel better... And when you do good, you feel good. This should not come as a surprise to any of us. We have known, through our own experiences that this equation holds true. But we don't need to rely only on our own experiences. Study after study has yielded the same results – we are happier when we are doing some good.

In 2007, MSNBC reported that a study of 65 students at the University of Kentucky revealed that the more that people participated in meaningful and selfless activities the happier they were – and – conversely – those students who sought out pleasurable activities not only did not feel good but actually felt worse.

In what is a classic study on the connection between doing good and emotional well-being, Dr. Joseph Canale of Marist College reported well over ten years ago that psychotherapists who encourage their clients to become involved in helping others have discovered a marked improvement in the people they are serving.

And even as far back as 1988, in a study published in *Psychology Today*, the research revealed that people help other people – not to impress others or to feel good about themselves... not to relieve their distress – and thus, avoid guilt... but rather, people help others because we know deep in our hearts that we are connected to others. The positive feelings– the feelings of satisfaction and joy when we do help others – is never the goal... **but it turns out that it is the result.**

This is a season of joy – and what can be a more certain source of joy in our lives than to let go of those habits and behaviors and practices – those disordered desires - that are making us miserable and to turn ourselves slowly but surely around: moving by faith and not by sight alone; step by step, until at some point we suddenly discover how much things have changed in our lives...

That we are new people... that we are rescued and redeemed people... that we are increasingly capable and more than willing to love and serve others... that we have let go of our needs to control things and have let God's grace transform our lives.

Then we will know that our prayer “restore to us the joy of our salvation has been answered. And that, my friends, could well be the best Christmas gift that we will ever receive. **Amen.**