

Selecting Expectations

Philippians 1: 3-11 and Luke 3: 1-6

“Prepare the way of the Lord.” Prepare the way for our God. Open your highways and your cities. Open your hearts and your hands. Paul writes, “Oh, that our love could overflow, more and more.” We are being asked to prepare the way. We are being asked to find places that need opening or filling up. That is the way to make a rough ways smooth.

Paul and John the Baptist wanted us to prepare for the coming of salvation. Salvation, a realization that we are whole; we are made and loved by God. Salvation is also a realization that we are forgiven, that all that is needed to achieve God’s love has been fully and utterly completed. Salvation also brings a sense of freedom and that leads to energy and the spirit of call. It proclaims that our actions matter, that helping others and ourselves live abundant life only increases love; it opens the way for salvation.

This has been called the Gospel, a word that means ‘the good news’; but the word *gospel* has often been paired with other words and these words, these gospels, are not good news. Two come to my mind especially during Advent. One is the *prosperity* gospel and the other is the *scarcity* gospel.

The prosperity gospel says that since you have been saved (an action that has been completed and fully done by God and not you or I, but since you have been saved), you can just gather up everything you need and then gather up some more. You can use resources because there always will be more and you should seek to grow your business, your collection, your stock because growth, well, it will always be there because God loves us. And if God truly loves us. says this gospel, we will show others by how rich and powerful we become.

Paul asks us to be filled with love, so that we can have knowledge. So here is some of the knowledge the world has collected over the last little while. There is absolutely nothing new; all the matter that God created is all we have. Every single drop of water together makes all the water that will ever be. Now the Earth is made to be renewable, but it is not renewable because it continues always to grow; it’s renewable because of seasons like winter, when things die and move into the earth, so they can become again. That is renewable; that is sustainable (rather than always growing), for God has given us enough.

And God has also said, the naked baby in that manger is your way to salvation. According to the prosperity gospel, Jesus wasn’t really loved by God. Those loved by God, according to this gospel,

are the rich and powerful. It is difficult to live a gospel of love and salvation and care for our Earth, while also collecting abundantly. It is hard to not want to seek after the prosperity gospel.

But ironically, there is also a *scarcity* gospel out there. A protest just this weekend, over unjust business practices in oil companies (which should have been a very important, interesting conversation for everyone on every side), turned into an anti-immigrant conversation. Why? Well, because if new people come then “we” will lose out, says this gospel. “Anyone new will take what I have.” And so, if I am already poor, struggling, then it is the fault of the newcomer, who took it away, and not the fault of the companies, businesses, social structures that never gave it to me in the first place. The scarcity gospel says there are only so many human rights to hand out; so, if we hand them all out to everybody, someone is going to run out. The scarcity gospel says that the love of God is a limited, non-renewable resource and so I can’t give mine to you, especially if you are different.

John the Baptist said that salvation was coming because there is more than enough; that salvation would be known because the low places would rise and the ones too high would lower down. But, oh it is not easy to live without hearing that scarcity gospel in our head. It’s the scarcity gospel that sends you to the bottom line, your own or another person’s. It is the one that says, “I believe in Jesus, but not in that seven loaves can feed five thousand people, Jesus.” It is difficult to believe that there is enough compassion in the world. That love is a renewable energy source. Paul’s reading today matches so well with John’s challenge. John proclaims that it is going to be hard. We are going to have to share, we are going to have to put those we hoped would be last, first.

Paul says, “Don’t worry because I am praying for you. Because knowledge and discernment will be yours.” And so, we have the knowledge; our scientists and other practitioners of earth care have given us. We are learning how some resources are more limited and some more limiting. How will the knowledge of the use of resources being out of control shape our Advent traditions?

Paul says, “I pray that your compassion is overwhelming.” How will we live out our belief that love is a renewable source; love is for all, that all are welcome at the table? How will those gospels change our Advent practices?

Brian Wren, in that first hymn we sang this morning, writes that it is when the last is first, that we can sing with joy. It is when the weak receive strength that we can begin to live with less fear. This year as you probably have noticed, around the church and in the practices of the staff, we have been trying to do less, to let go, to empty out spaces so that we all can welcome in all. The display board, instead of being a shout out to all the wonderful things of Christmas (of which there are many), is instead full of space. Or as one person put it this week, “Where is everything?”

It’s intentional, as is the empty Advent wreath. Once again, Tammy-Jo, Karen and I are trying to give you the traditions with just enough of a difference to ask you: Where will you seek out Christ this year?

Another piece that the ministry team has been striving for this year (and this is our prayer for you): that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best for you so that in the day of Christ you may be pure, healthy; that you be ready to both be loved and love. Let us go and produce a harvest of righteousness, remembering that all things come through Jesus Christ, our salvation. Amen.