

Preparing Christ's Way Home, To Us.

Revelation 3:20; John 1:14; Isaiah 40: 1-8; Luke 3: 1-7

I'm sure I've said before that Advent often begins for me as I listen to the tenor solo open Handel's Messiah with the words from Isaiah we've heard today: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." Yes, tenderly because they've been through a lot. And so have we sometimes. The Lord comes in kindness.

Then Isaiah starts talking about making a way for the Lord into our lives. Make a highway, a big broad thoroughfare for our Lord, with wildflowers on each side! Remove the obstacles! Smooth his path. Advent is about the coming of the Lord into our lives. Why do we celebrate Advent every year? Because we need it every year! We need a fresh coming of the Lord into our lives. Or, perhaps, a first coming of the Lord into our lives.

So the title of the sermon, Preparing Christ's Way Home, To Us.

I

I want to talk today about Christian experience, not theology, experience.

Growing up in the Baptist tradition we talked a lot about a "personal relationship with Jesus." Jesus coming into our hearts. In evangelistic

meetings like revivals there was a prayer called “The Sinner’s Prayer”. The one used at Billy Graham Crusades was the one most used. Here were the words:

Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness. I believe you died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite you to come into my heart. I want to trust and follow You as my Lord and Savior. In Your Name Amen.

I have no doubt the prayer was a pivotal moment in the lives of many persons. There is a lot we carry that we feel bad about, regrets aplenty. And here was a way to do something about it, and it offered a personal relationship with our Maker, with Jesus. However, there were also many for whom the saying of the prayer brought doubt and what I call “salvation anxiety.” They prayed it and nothing happened that gave them the sense that Jesus entered their hearts, no “heart strangely warmed” as John Wesley described his experience.

It further deepened the psychological anxiety of those who wanted but did not experience the “blessed assurance” that they were told would happen to them. Did they pray the prayer insincerely? Were there unconfessed sins they were not aware of? Did they not believe deeply enough? I read the memoir of a young woman who had experienced severe

anxiety about her salvation all her young life. She worried constantly about whether she had prayed the sinner's prayer incorrectly. Her conservative parents sent her to a Christian Psychiatric Hospital where she met an amazing psychiatrist who told her that there was nothing wrong with her faith. Rather she suffered a psychological condition he called "extreme scrupulosity," a constant, crippling anxiety that she hadn't done whatever she was attempting right.

Perhaps it would be helpful to re-examine the ways Christ can come into our lives— and the ways we can prepare his way. How can we make his way smooth into our lives? I know parents, like my own, who make his way smooth by loving their children and taking such delight in them that it is an easy step to believe that God loves them that way, that Jesus loves that way too. Methodists call this "prevenient grace", the grace that goes before, preparing the way for grace.

Of course, tragically, the opposite can be true as well, parents who through abuse or through their abusive form of Christian religion make Christ's way rough.

II

First, we should recognize that Christ's coming into our lives may not be in the realm of personal experience, or of a particular inner feeling we

think we must have. It may come through exposure to Christ's way over the years that have formed your life, day by day. Like a long conversation with Jesus. He may be forming you in ways you do not know. Others may see it more.

John the Baptist, following Isaiah's prophecy, was called to preach repentance to the Israelites as a way of preparing the way of the Lord into their lives and into life of the nation. The call he preached was broader than accepting Jesus as "personal Lord and Savior", as my tradition put it. John was calling not just individuals, but also the nation itself to repent.

And he sounded a little like those fire and brimstone preachers who scared me when I was young: "An axe is laid to the root of the tree!", he thundered. If he came to preach here, we'd say : "I think you came to the wrong church! Check on the one down the street."

Thrillingly he was saying, "Prepare for change, because the Changer is on the way!" You may think you have too many years and miles on you for change, but I love how Stanley Kunitz ends a poem about an older man looking back over his life. In the last line, he says, "I am not done with my changes."

What John called for was a transformation of our personal lives and the life of the nation. I'm not sure what that would look like in a democratic

Republic like ours, but it would mean more than revivals sweeping across the land, it would mean things like public advocacy for justice and compassion for those who are most vulnerable in our nation. And it would affect how citizens vote.

The Civil Rights Movement began in the lives of many white people when they saw black children being knocked to the street with fire hoses, when they heard of the four black girls dying when a bomb was thrown into their church. This non-violent social movement led to the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. A kind of national repentance was at work.

In Hebrew the word for repentance is SHUV. It does not carry with it a sense of shame; it means to turn or return to God. To turn around. There are times we realize we are headed the wrong way, and it's time to turn around. We say to ourselves, maybe also others, "Watch me turn!" So the word doesn't have the sound of a police siren behind us, but the sound of trumpets over the canyon at dawn. A New World Symphony!

III

But Christ comes near in many ways. In beauty too. The beauty of the world can make him room. The poet Hopkins wrote: "For Christ plays in ten thousand places," as in the loveliness of others and the world. The

Eastern Orthodox Church uses icons in worship and in private devotion, that we might gaze on the beauty of the Lord, not just in the beauty of his face, also in the beauty of his grace. Baptists used to sing “Fairest Lord Jesus, picturing him garbed in the beauty of the world. So beauty can be a path of God into our lives.

Paul wrote, “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.” (Romans 10:8) Christ is that close, as close as your own breath. Advent says, He is near! How might he be nearer? Here, even?

IV

In the book of Revelation, we hear the words of Christ, familiar to some of us: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” (Revelation 3:20). It can mean the opening of our hearts, our lives to him. And our Lord being courteous, he knocks. He does not go barging in, into our inner sacred sanctum. He knocks, he waits. I’m talking here about Jesus who is not only a moral guide, a teacher, but can also be a living presence in us.

You may think your house is too much a mess for Christ to enter, but he says, “No worry. I’ll sit anywhere.” In St. Augustine’s Confessions, he prayed this prayer to Christ:

My soul is like a house, small for you to enter, but I pray you to enlarge it. It is in ruins, but I ask you to remake it. It contains much that you would not be pleased to see: this I know and do not hide. But who is to rid it of these things? There is no one but you.

This verse in Revelation goes broader. It is in the middle of a letter that the angel of the church at Laodicea writes to that church, so it is about Christ knocking on the door of a church! And it is with the same courtesy Christ has for us as individuals: He will not come uninvited.

How then might invite him in? We do when we begin worship in our prayers. We do as we come to the Table, for the Table is a place where he has promised to meet us.

What if we invited him to help us in the ways our church most needs? In one healing story in the gospels, Jesus asked the blind man begging by the side of the road: "What do you want me to do for you?" And the man went for broke! He did not ask for alms, he said, "My eyes, Lord, heal my eyes." If Jesus asked our church that question, how might we as a church answer? What would we want from him? What would we want most? It's a good question for a church to ponder together.

Every year in Advent we read the pivotal verse in the Prologue in John's gospel:

"And the word became flesh and dwelt among us." The verb is the key. In Jesus God took up *abode* in us. He took up residence in us, came to abide in us. Advent tells of a God who is with us, among us, and for us. And not just us, but the whole world has become his home. The whole world has been given God's grace and truth, grace upon grace upon grace! We sing "Joy To The World the Lord Is Come!" Not just Joy to the CHURCH, the world!

V

How do we make way for Jesus into our lives today? There is an anthem with the words, "Will we know him when he comes?" In Matthew 25, Jesus tells us one place where we can find him, that he is waiting for us in the least of these, in the hungry and thirsty, in the sick and the stranger and the one in prison. When we go to them, we meet him in them. Mother Teresa, who ministered to the poor of Calcutta, said when she saw a suffering person coming one day, "Here comes Christ in another distressing disguise."

But where else, how else? We may need a rebirth of our imagination about Jesus and how he might come into our lives. A Welsh poet describes

Jesus as a stranger, an outsider, in his words, “the outlaw, the lost heir, the exiled king, the one who escapes the conscription of every army.” Such a difference from the American Jesus, the nice safe Jesus confined in our comfortable pieties. Or, this New American Jesus all too ready to take up the crown the devil offered in the wilderness, the crown of political power. The Son of Man came to serve, not to rule.

Our Jesus came as a needy baby in shepherd’s stall in a tiny country at the edge of the Roman Empire. Jesus is on the way from the way from the corners of our hearts and minds and imaginations.

My mentor George Buttrick described Jesus: He is “surprise of Mercy, outgoing Gladness, Rescue, Healing and Life.” This is who he is and how he comes.

“Honey, there’s someone at the door!”