

Setting the Foundation
Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 1:57-80
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Second Sunday of Advent—Peace
Woodbury UMC
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You never know if a thing is going to be any good, but based on early reviews of the long gestating Steven Spielberg remake of West Side Story, I am really looking forward to seeing it. The 1961 version is so great that I don't expect this to make me forget it exists, but when you see a new staging of an old favorite, you might be able to see things in a new light.

That is one reason we are now in week 2 of our Advent worship and sermon series, Close to Home. This is less a case of a remake, and more a case of a... restaging, intended to help you appreciate it in a new way. These are old stories, told in old scriptures that you have all probably heard before, and if we get it right, you will be able to see them a little differently this year, catching new facets of these stories.

For me, I remember someone talking about West Side Story, noting that if a man went into the Puerto Rican part of town and started calling out for Maria, he should have expected 15 or 20 women to stick their heads out of the window.

What it means for something to be Close to Home, and how we are affected when something hits us close to home, these are the theme of the season. This sermon is called Laying the Foundation, because that is exactly what these scriptures do, they lay the foundation for the story of salvation through Jesus the Christ, that we are creeping up on. We are starting to shift gears a little. We aren't there yet, it is only the second week of Advent, and yet the pieces are being brought out and put into place, so that when the time is right, we may be more fully able to celebrate the awe and mystery of God incarnating as a baby. The foundation is something pretty important but also frequently not glamorous, so before we move to center stage, we take a moment to consider what's undergirding everything. If you get the

foundation right, then the rest has a solid grounding and you can build everything else with confidence.

We have two scriptures this week. In the letter from Paul to the young church at Phillipi, Paul is encouraging them, trying to lay a foundation of love, encouragement and faith strong enough to create a church that will last. In Luke, we meet John, eventually known as The Baptist, a figure foundational to the ministry of Jesus. Given both of these stories, this is a good time of year for us to consider — What are the words, blessings, and actions that have laid the foundation for your life? Who helped lay a foundation of faith for you? How are you doing this for others? These are good questions to ponder, since many of us got to know Jesus through family members — truly the foundational experiences of our lives—and with a good foundation at home, you grow into the confidence to be bold. Now that it is December, it is starting to feel a little more like Christmas will be here soon. The anticipation is beginning to build in us, as we anticipate its emergence out of the cold and the dark, full of warmth and light and music and joy.

Christmas traditions revolving around the home all creating a foundation for the family — lights, wreaths, crèches, tree, nog, parties, Christmas music. We're anticipating those things, but we aren't quite there yet, and the excitement we feel about some or all of these things really makes it all the harder to wait patiently. See the tree here at the front of the sanctuary? But it isn't decorated, isn't lit up. That will be next week — but in the meantime, waiting for it to happen, our own anticipation builds.

Anticipation. Too long ago to say for sure, but there is a good chance I learned that word from an old catsup commercial.

You may remember the old ketchup commercial where Carly Simon sings the song "Anticipation" while the ketchup slowly hangs in midair. I am of the generation where I knew Carly Simon's voice from the catsup commercial long before I know she had performed and written a few other songs.

Anticipation should be a joyful feeling, not the feeling of anxiety and dread. But the feelings are similar in that whatever we expect, whether good or bad, is often surprising. Anticipation and dread don't seem to be all that far apart, and I think it is fair to point out that some of us have had occasions when both of these things are mixed together. None of you are feeling like time is growing short, or you have too much to get done before you are ready for Christmas, right?

Over the last two weeks, I referred to how our Bible is in fact a compendium of all manner of literature, some styles of which are lost to us moderns, while others are quite recognizable. I've preached on this before, but it had never occurred to me that one could make a pretty solid case for musical theater as one of those Biblical genres. I'm reminded of that when I read the scripture from Luke. Zechariah goes from being totally mute and utterly unable to speak, to singing a long solo about the destiny of this little baby. I mentioned West Side Story earlier, and for those of you who like musical theater, what could be more natural than a man bringing his baby to the temple, and then bursting into an intricate song for all to hear? Yes, my NRSV translation uses the words that he prophesied, to our modern eyes it reads as a poem of sorts, but of course there is much in the Bible meant to be sung or performed, and what remains are the words and a sense of musicality — think of the entire book of Psalms, for example.

In researching this sermon, I realized that Zechariah is first man named in the Gospel of Luke - and a high priest at that, whose wife Elizabeth was a daughter of a priest. These are Godly people who know their stuff. Which means they know their history, know their scriptures. Zechariah is saying that their son is chosen by God to be a prophet of God, a grand destiny — and they both know how prophets end up. Even in this happy moment, the anticipation has a tinge of dread to it.

In the miraculous birth of John the Baptist, we see the foundation of what is to come. We see how interwoven his story is with Jesus' origin story.

When Zechariah regains his voice, he offers deep praise for God's tender mercy, and casts a vision for his own child. He sings blessings of a grand destiny into John's being. This lays the foundation for John's life. In turn, John will go on to prepare the way for Jesus who will guide us all in the way of peace. In this week, by considering the foundations, we focus on making space—in our lives and our imaginations—for God's blessings to break through. John means "Yahweh is gracious" — and that is what Zechariah is celebrating here.

It is a hard mix that we are given here — the joy of a new baby, and all of the hope and potential we project onto them. A baby could grow up to be absolutely anyone, could do anything at all! And yet this is an old story, so that joy is leavened because we know what became of this little baby. Zechariah's soliloquy isn't so different from Mary's Magnificat in this regard, although hers is more clearly identified as a song— as they both tie their babies deep into history, project out some of what will come, and in all of it declare their faith in God.

I've been enjoying our devotional, and for this week it includes a poem that I want to share with you, imagining different words to a newborn baby:

Words for the beginning

If I could give you words for the very beginning— for the stretches
and the yawns,

and the opening of eyes,
for the first hiccups,
and the first smiles,
and the first purse of your lips, I would say,

“Oh, dear child, how you are loved.”

But the thing about love
is you can't stop there,
so I would go on to say,

“You are strong,
stronger than you think.
And you are not alone—
look at these parents who adore you
and these doctors and nurses fighting for you. And you are enough,
already enough.

You haven’t done anything yet. You’ve just been here, breathing,
sleeping,

and already, you are enough. And then I might say,
“This world is a mess,
but it is your home,

and you can make it better,
so always try to make it better.

And maybe most important of all: there is a love
that is bigger than my understanding, that moves through this world,
and I call that love God. And that love is here, here in this room,
and that love knows your name by heart.”

Those are the words I would say to you
as you stretch and yawn and open your eyes on the very first morning
of your very first day.

Let that be your foundation,
like Zechariah did for John.

Let love be your beginning.

This is a loving foundation for John, the kind I wish all people would get.

As you think to children you have known, or to your own childhood,
what are the specific acts that build a foundation of love? And since the
church is predicated on love, and one of the ways we do that is by
supporting families as well as we can, shouldn’t helping people build a
foundation of love be a part of our work? Part of the miracle of John’s birth is

that even though Zechariah and Elizabeth are both righteous before God, blameless, and barren. The birth of their child was a miracle. We should be mindful in this season with all the talk of babies how painful it may be for those who have been praying for their own miracle baby, and their prayers as yet seem to be unanswered. That is part of why we have a Blue Christmas service in a few weeks — to be as loving as we can be to those who just need to be loved and accepted, without any expectation of anything else.

Our scriptures both speak to this. Let's shift a moment to see Paul's words to the church in Phillipi. Like Zechariah's song, Paul's letter to the Philippians is filled with blessing, gratitude, and tenderness. Paul prays that their "love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight" (v. 9). For Paul, the foundation of truth and wisdom is love—for God, for self, and for neighbor. This is how they will "determine what is best," even in the midst of contentious and harrowing events—tensions, persecution, and Paul's incarceration. There is that tension again!

I think it is important that we do not forget — he writes of love and joy from a prison cell! That is some seriously subversive writing! He is not writing hypothetically either — when he writes that "love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight," these are not meant to be words that you hear, think they are nice, and then go home for a day off of work. These are meant to be words that lead to action.

In Woodbury and Southbury and Bethlehem, in this community and in surrounding areas, how is love overflowing into wisdom and right action? **Is love just a nice thing to say, or is love an action we DO?**

We began worship this morning by lighting the Peace candle. I am reminded that true peace is not limited to the absence of active hostility, but consists of actions that bring about peace that is rooted in justice. We long for that peace, a peace that lasts, as has been the hope of Christians for millennia. Talk of peace and love is never bad, but it is best when it leads to the work necessary for peace and love to flourish.

That leads to my final point. As we read about God's great love for these foundational people in the Gospel story, I remind **you that God rejoices no less for you than did Zechariah for his son.** Zechariah so loved his son that he could glimpse him through God's eternal eyes. God so loves you that he has laid out a path for you to follow. God has given you something that makes you uniquely you. There is something in you that transcends employment, labels, gender, race, or status. God has created you with a purpose, and is calling you to that purpose today. You were created to do no less than John once did – to prepare the way of the Lord, and “to show the people the way to salvation through the forgiveness of sins.” All of us are a part of a story that is in one way all about love.

Amen.