

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, 12.23.18, Micah 5:2-5a, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 3:1-18, Psalm 80:1-7

Sermon Resources: <http://words.dancingwiththeword.com/2015/11/one-brick-at-time-preparing-way-of-lord.html>

<https://modernmetanoia.org/2018/12/03/advent-3c-the-way-things-are-is-not-how-they-have-to-be/>

<https://momastery.com/blog/2012/07/30/progress/>

It kind of makes me laugh the way our passage from Luke is written. We have John the Baptist out here, calling people vipers, angrily insinuating that all they're doing is fleeing from wrath and not exhibiting true repentance, calling their heritage and standing into question, saying they're no better than rocks, talking about how the Lord is going to come and separate the wheat from the chaff and talking about how some of it will be burned with unquenchable fire, and then it says, immediately after, that this was the "good news" John was proclaiming.

**Good* news? Really? This is *good* news?*

The scripture's not wrong, it is good news. But it's kind of tricky to find in the midst of all the talk of fire and John's insults. But even with him being a blunt and terrifying sort of pastoral presence, scores of people still are coming to John, wanting what he had to offer, wanting to hear what he had to tell them. Like in our Psalm 80 for today, the people coming out to John are crying out for a shepherd, for someone to watch over them and help them and tend them and dry their tears. These people want shepherding, they want salvation, they want the forgiveness and repentance John describes, they want, as one commentator said, to know that things don't have to be as they are, that their lives and the world can change, can be different. And in the midst of all the other things John says, he does proclaim a Lord who will come, a Shepherd to tend the flock, forgiveness and

salvation and repentance that will make it so that things don't have to be as they are, and that is very good news.

When John talks about forgiveness and repentance, he also talks about preparing the Lord's way, a way which will mean every valley filled, every hill and mountain made low, the crooked straight, and the rough places smooth, flat like a plain. The Lord's way will be a way of removed obstacles, of things being cleared out, and made easier. The baptism of forgiveness and repentance which John proclaims is a kind of cleaning things out, a removing of obstacles, so that the Lord can be fully present in our lives, so that our salvation can come, so that the new heaven and earth can arrive, unimpeded.

A few weeks ago, we talked about the passage from Malachi which describes the Lord's coming as a purifying, like fire, like soap; this is also called sanctification. And this purification/sanctification was the same idea, of removing the things which get in the way of our relationship with God, removing the things which prevent us from loving each other well, removing those obstacles so that it is easier to be the people God calls us to be—filling the valleys and bringing down the mountains and making it level in our souls.

John is taking this a step further: with the forgiveness, the purifying and sanctifying, they also need to bear fruit, to show repentance, and that means making things easier, removing obstacles, preparing the way, for the Lord's presence in the world, and for other people, so all flesh can see the salvation of our God, unimpeded.

And this doesn't require anything huge. When the people ask John "What, then, should we do?" he doesn't say they have to go overturn the empire singlehandedly or save the world themselves. He names things in their day to day lives, he names things in their current jobs, he also adjusts it for each person. If you have two coats, share one. If you have extra food, share it. If you are a tax collector

don't take more than you are supposed to. If you are a soldier don't extort money or use threats and make false accusations, be content with your wages instead. These everyday actions are evidence of repentance, and they help remove obstacles and level things out and make things easier for other people.

Part of the purifying and sanctifying of our lives is bearing fruit, showing repentance, and like John says to the people, it will be in day to day actions, in little things like sharing a coat and being content with what we have, it will be repentance that removes obstacles and makes things level and easier for other people. Bearing fruit of repentance will happen little by little, day by day, person by person. By sharing that coat, by sharing our food, by not hoarding and building up more than we need, by learning how we have been a threat and changing what we do so that it doesn't threaten, by not engaging in practices that take from other people, by practicing contentment.

Which sounds nice and do-able, certainly, thank goodness we don't have to save the world ourselves. The real problem here is that sometimes we simply do not want to make things easier on other people, we won't want to remove obstacles for them. And we particularly don't want to do that, if we have suffered or feel like we've suffered. Glennon Melton tells a story of sitting on an airplane next to a man who, through their conversation, finds out that she runs a kind of charity, and he basically tells her what a terrible idea this is, and that people are never gonna learn and grow if they have this kind of assistance, and it comes out in the conversation that earlier in his life, his family home burned to the ground, and his family lost everything, and they spent months living in their car and years trying to recover from the loss, and he says nobody helped us, and we had to get by on our own, why should these people your group helps not have to do the same?

Sometimes we are desperately afraid that someone will get something they don't deserve. We're worried this will happen, we want to make sure it won't

happen, and have systems and plans and policies in place to make sure it doesn't happen, because we are afraid somebody will get something they don't deserve.

And, kind of like the man described earlier, I think that's some of our impetus behind our reluctance to remove obstacles and make things level and easier for other people, especially if that was not the case for us, because what if someone gets what they don't deserve, what if they get a level path to walk, or never have to endure any obstacles, or things are made easier for them and they don't deserve it? Nobody made things easier for us, the way wasn't level for us, we encountered and had to overcome obstacles. Why should that person get our extra coat, our food, why should they get special attention or consideration, why shouldn't they have to figure it out and work the system and get by just like we did? Like that man said, nobody helped his family.

Because a lot of us did live hard lives, endured a lot, the mountains were high, the valleys were low, the shadows dark and obstacles difficult, it's hard to imagine why someone else should get the benefit of our effort, when they might not deserve it.

The thing is, we're worried that somebody might get something they don't deserve, but even if our lives were hard, even if we do feel that we suffered and why should somebody else get an easy, level path, we all get things we don't deserve. Our Hebrews passage is describing Jesus' sacrifice, finished once-for-all, and we certainly did not deserve that, while we were sinners, Christ died for us—Jesus sacrificed for us, for our salvation. The shining light of Jesus Christ which removed obstacles and made things easier on us, we did not deserve it, but we got it. To be fed like a flock by a peaceful shepherd, we didn't deserve it, but we got it. In the book of Matthew, Jesus describes his yoke not as heavy weight to bear, a punishment to be endured, he says that coming to him is like having your burdens

lifted, that coming to him is like putting on a gentle and light yoke, instead, making it easier on us, removing obstacles for us.

At the end of the conversation with the man on the airplane, Glennon Melton acknowledges that the man truly did suffer, and his suspicion about her charity is warranted. Nobody helped him or his family and they had to endure and overcome. But, she says, don't you wish somebody had? Don't you wish somebody had helped? He only kind of grudgingly acknowledges this, but I think we get it. Some of us may have lived through things where we were not helped, where obstacles were not removed and our lives were not made easier. And I wish someone had helped. But here, in this church, part of what we proclaim is that the son of God has come to start this process of purifying and sanctifying, to bring forgiveness and salvation, to plant seeds of repentance and good fruit in our lives, that he shepherds us and lifts our burdens, that he brings peace and level paths, that he removed obstacles and made things easier for us, so we have had some help, even though we didn't deserve it. God so loved the world, we got Jesus anyway.

This is John's point to the people fleeing wrath, but not exhibiting repentance. He says you think you're all good, claiming that you are children of Abraham, but God can make *rocks* into children of Abraham, you think you have this status that sets you above and apart and exempts you from showing repentance that helps other people, but you don't. You've been given a lot, but it wasn't anything you deserved. And so, to exhibit those fruits of repentance, you'll have to pass that on to other people, share your coat, lessen their financial burden, stop making them afraid, remove obstacles and level things out and make things easier for them, the way the Lord did for you.

And there are people in this world facing very deep valleys, and very high mountains, who are stumbling over obstacles that we refuse to move. People who are hungry and cold, people who are working paycheck to paycheck and

overburdened financially, people who are afraid and feeling terrorized, people who languish in prison, who suffer because of medical expenses, who have no safety net, and no way up or out, without a little help. So often we don't make things easier on other people, believing that we endured and overcame all on our own, and we dare not let them possibly get something they don't deserve. We all got what we don't deserve. If we are really being sanctified, if we have really been forgiven and are repenting, the fruit of that needs to show up in our day to day actions, in our lives, in how we level things out and remove obstacles and make things easier for other people.

That's the evidence of our repentance, that's the fruit of it borne in our lives, passing on the light yoke, and the tender shepherding we received. Removing obstacles and level things out and making things easier, so that there's nothing in the way of the Lord's presence in the world, so all flesh can know the salvation of our God. And that doesn't mean it'll always be easier on us—we'll have to share what we have, and learn to be content, and restrain our words and actions sometimes, and that's not always easy. But when we do that for other people, the way the Savior did for us, then we are preparing the way for the Lord, and we are truly living as children of God.

Let's remember all that we have been given in Jesus Christ, and let's recognize that we received even though we did not deserve it. Let's make sure to bear fruit of repentance in our lives, that our forgiveness and sanctification shows up in how we live. Let's work to prepare the way of the Lord, let's work to remove obstacles and make things easier and level for other people. Let's do so in our daily lives, in our daily actions, in our homes and our work. Let's do so by sharing what we have, and lifting burdens, and changing so that other people's lives are made easier. Let's bear that fruit of repentance so that everyone can know God's presence unimpeded, and so that all flesh will see the salvation of our God. Amen.