

SERMON: Prepare the Way with Love

TEXT: Luke 3:1-6

I want to share with you a true story. It happened just days ago at a church just a few blocks from here. It was written by the pastor of that church (with a few minor edits from me.) And it is one of the most beautiful stories I have ever heard.

Full house tonight!

10 men and 1 woman (the wife of one of the men).

It didn't storm like was predicted, but I'm glad we opened, anyway.

They had so much fun tonight watching the game and putting up the Christmas stuff.

Gee whiz, the atmosphere was like a teenager's sleep over!!

We had to take down the big tree and put up the small tree...I didn't have the right stand.

We need more garland for the windows—that'll wait until tomorrow.

The guys are pretty proud of their accomplishments. Me too.

Within 10 minutes of lying down, all but the newest guy and the youngest guy are asleep.

The new guy said he normally sleeps in a building.

He said the wind blew the doors open and it scared him to death.

He was out walking and saw one of the guys who was here last winter

he was on his way, so they came together.

"I just want to feel safe tonight", he said.

One said he was going to lay on the floor up by where the man preaches.

Ahem...Iiiiiiii am the preacher!

He chuckled.

He said, "I'm an old head and it's a new day...those men who say women can't or shouldn't are just fools and don't you ever listen to them"

I just smiled at him.

I would NEVER listen to 'them'.

After I turned out the light one said,

"Hey little preacher lady".

Hey what.

"I love you and I just want you to know that".

I love you too.

"I know that", he said.

Goodnight, John Boy.

Now the sacred snoring has begun.

Most of you recognize that this story was written by Renita Green, Pastor at St. James AME Church where the People's Shelter begins its second year of operation as an emergency shelter for the homeless. Renita invites people into the sacred space of the church building. Others might hesitate, concerned about vandalism and misuse, dirt and spills. But I believe – and I'm sure she does, too, that it becomes *so much more sacred* with them there. Renita even goes out into the dark and cold night to find others and coax them to come in where it's safe and warm.

In her passion for this ministry, she has had the church refurbished to include a shower. She has recruited numerous volunteers to bring food, to do laundry, to visit with the guests, to attend to their many other needs. One man mentioned that he had played the guitar at one time and he missed the joy he got from making music. Within hours, a guitar was found, and the man was playing happily – and well! – the next day when I was there with some food for a Thanksgiving breakfast. Another man came in with holes in his shoes. They were held together with duct tape, and he was praying for a better option. The next day he had new boots on his feet that, in his words, *fit like they were made for him, and must have come from an angel*. As a bonus, there was a pair of tennis shoes that he could take with him. The guests at the shelter also share with one another when

they can; one brought sandwiches, another purchased his favorite breakfast sausage to share. They feel so proud when they can contribute.

Every time Renita tells a story about the People's Shelter, she gives it a hashtag: *Loving Out Loud*.

Indeed. This is what loving our neighbor looks like. And this is what it means to prepare for the coming of Christ.

As we read in Paul's letter to the Philippians: "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Imagine that overflowing of love like a river of lava – not burning and destroying, but a healing lava – that fills every rift and valley, that smooths out all the scarred and rough places, that levels and prepares the way of the Lord, so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

One contemporary theologian described it this way: “Luke quotes Isaiah’s prophecy detailing what is required if all flesh is to see the salvation of God. Make straight desert highways. Valleys will be lifted up, mountains made low. A great leveling will occur. Rough places smoothed. Obstacles obliterated. Nothing will stand in the way, obscure or create a stumbling block for the coming of the Lord, for the gift of salvation. No one will be left behind, sacrificed because they are slow or infirm. All flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (Jill Duffield, *Looking into the Lectionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2018, *The Presbyterian Outlook*)

I used to think that Jesus was the one who would do this work of straightening and leveling to make the path smooth for us. But that is not the case. The voice of the one crying in the wilderness is speaking to us, commanding us, calling us: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

This is the work of Advent. It is incumbent upon us, as followers of Christ, to make sure that all people can feel his love and know that it is real. It is our responsibility to clear the way of all obstacles, so that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Too often, of course, we are distracted from this work. We are distracted with things that do not satisfy: gifts, decorations, shopping, cooking and baking, parties, more shopping, concerts, stuff, and more stuff. You may argue that these can be ways for us to show our love to others. True enough. But is all this busyness and stuff the way that we show *God's love* to others? Instead of clearing a path, I fear we are only creating more obstacles.

Furthermore, while we may acknowledge these shortcomings, we don't often do much to change our ways. We just shake our heads and lament that this is the way the world operates, and then we continue on the same path, away from Christ.

But remember when John the Baptist was heralding the coming of Jesus, as we read from the Gospel of Luke he was "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...." "Prepare the way of the Lord," he cried, "make his paths straight." Repentance is also part of that preparation.

We need to repent of our lack of love, our chosen blindness to those who are oppressed, our need to blame others for their own poverty or lack of success. We need to repent of our divisions, the ways in which we feed into hateful rhetoric and

even enjoy demonizing those who disagree with us. We need to repent of our refusal to acknowledge our privilege and that we are complicit in perpetuating a system designed to give us more advantages while keeping others down.

Jesus was never stingy or careful about choosing who would receive his love and who would not. He shared it abundantly and passionately with all – even those who would eventually murder him. God sent his only son to earth to show his great love for us, making the sacrifice no parent ever wants to make. So, who are we to say who deserves God’s love? Who are we to decide who is worthy?

Trappist monk, theologian, and mystic, Thomas Merton wrote, “Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy.” Similarly, it was the prayer and the encouragement of the Apostle Paul: “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight....”

During this and every season of the year, may we **PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD WITH LOVE**, to the glory of God!

**AMEN.**