

SERMON

STARTERS

Bass Mitchell

November 30, 2003 1st Sunday of Advent

1 Thess. 3:9-13 Jer. 33:14-16
Ps. 25:1-10; Lk. 21:25-36

Straws of Love

While awaiting the coming of the Lord, Paul encourages his Christian friends in Thessalonica, and us, too, to grow or abound in love—for one another and for all people.

As I read and thought about Paul's words, perhaps the one thing we all can do to prepare for Christmas is to seek to abound in love for one another and for all people.

Sometime ago a friend of mine shared something they did in their family. She said that a favorite Advent activity her mother used in their family was to draw names at the beginning of Advent. Her mother made a crèche or nativity set which had the manger without Jesus (until Christmas morning). She then added some small pieces of straw. Each time they did something kind or thoughtful for the person whose name they drew, they were to take a piece of the straw and place it in that manger. These were to be straws of love, gifts to welcome the birth of the Christ Child.

(You could do this for your church, by asking them to do kind deeds for others each week and then having a time on Sunday for them to place straws of love in an empty manger. In so doing, they would also be preparing their hearts for him to be reborn there).



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December 7, 2003 2nd Sunday of Advent

Lk. 3:1-6; Mal. 3:1-4
Lk. 1:68-79; Phil. 4:4-7

On Mountain Moving, Valley Filling, & Road Straightening

Each Advent season I listen to Handel's wondrous "Messiah." One of my favorites in it sings of the valleys being filled, mountains made low, and the crooked roads made straight. He was basing this, of course, on Isaiah 40:3-5 which is quoted in Luke's reading for today. As I listened to these words and the music again, the following came to me:

What are the mountains that need moving in our lives that are keeping the Prince of Peace from coming this Christmas? Resentment? Anger? What are the mountains in the lives of others that we can help remove?

What are the valleys, the low places that need filling in our lives this Advent that the Prince of Peace might come to us anew? The pain? The grief? The depression? What are the low places for others? How might we help them be filled?

What are the crooked roads that need to be straightened? Surely there is some crookedness in us? What sins are there in our lives that take us onto detours away from God?

Advent is the time, with God's help, to move the mountains, to fill the low places, and to straighten the crooked roads. Time to get started, don't you think?

December 14, 2003 3rd Sunday of Advent

Lk. 3:7-18; Zeph. 3:14-20
Isa. 12:2-6; Phil. 4:4-7

"Are You Ready for Christmas?"

I was at the mall recently getting a hair cut and doing a little shopping. The woman cutting my hair asked me a ques-

tion that I've been asked quite often over the last few weeks, "Well, are you ready for Christmas?"

"Are you kidding?" I replied.

"I know what you mean," she said. "I haven't met a person yet who said they were ready for Christmas. I'm sure not."

As I walked out into the mall, I couldn't help but notice that a favorite article of clothing for Christmas shoppers this year was a red sweatshirt that said in large white letters, "Don't get in my way. I'm Christmas shopping!"

I had a strange thought then. Suppose John the Baptist designed a Christmas sweatshirt. It would probably be made of camel hair. On the front would be, "Are you ready for Christmas?" Answer on the back: "REPENT."

Doubt they would sell very well, though, even, I suspect, with us religious folk. I confess to you that I'm not too thrilled with John's Christmas message. I want to be able to say to you and to myself, "Rejoice! Deck your halls with boughs of holly, fa-la-la-la-la." But instead, the message that's given is, "Repent! Messiah is coming! Repent!"

Merry Christmas!

December 21, 2003 4th Sunday of Advent

Lk. 1:39-55; Mic. 5:2-5
Lk. 1:47-55; Heb. 10:5-10

I Believe in Babies

Babies are pure potential. They come to bring hope with them, to make a difference. Our world needs such hope, needs these little ones who come with such great power in their hands and hearts.

How ironic this is, for babies are the smallest of the small. But God often uses the tiny to do great things. A little leaven can go a long way, Jesus taught. A tiny mustard seed can become a great plant. And Micah says that the smallest village of Bethlehem will produce the greatest leader of all.

Think of that little baby born to a slave woman in Egypt. He became Moses and what a difference he made.

Think of that little child born to a poor man and his wife living in colonial Kentucky. He became Abraham Lincoln. What a difference he made.

Our New Testament texts today are about babies—John the Baptist and Jesus. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months. What a difference these two babies would make in the world.

And this is the heart of Christmas to me. A baby was born who would change everything. In that tiny body born in Bethlehem, the fate of the world rests. I believe in that baby. I believe that baby came to change the world. But that begins with me...

December 28, 2003
1st Sunday after
Christmas Day

Col. 3:(1-11) 12-17; 1 Sam. 2:18-20;
26; Ps. 148; Lk. 2:41-52

What the Best Dressed
Christians are Wearing this Year

As I read these words from Paul this week, I found myself thinking back to one of the things I really dreaded as a kid—having to get new clothes. I had to get them just before school started and also at Christmas. In this passage, Paul, like a fashion designer, shares some of what's out and what's in for the best dressed Christians this New Year. "...for you have *Put Off* the old self with its habits and have *Put On* the new self..." (Colossians 3:9-10a). "You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own. So then, you must *Clothe Yourselves*..." (12a-c).

Paul lists some of those old clothes to take off and discard... "...sexual immorality..." (vs.5). Other old garments Paul names are "...greed, anger, hateful feelings, insults, obscene talk, lying...." (vs.5, 8-9) - all of these, Paul says, are old clothes, the old ways of life fit now only for the trash dump.

Then Paul calls out models to present some of these new designer clothes that are always in fashion for Christians:

- Compassion
- Kindness
- Meekness
- Patience

Forgiveness (see vss. 12-13)

But to crown off the outfits, he saves the best for last. It's the one garment that more than any other shows we are truly Christians. Its in verse 14. This new garment is love.

January 4, 2004
Epiphany of Our Lord

Isa. 60:1-6; Ps. 72:1-7, 10-14
Eph. 3:1-12; Mt. 2:1-12

Arise, Shine!

We lived on the banks of the Neuse River in North Carolina. A hurricane was coming. It came toppling trees, shaking the ground and our house. Then we were lost in a deep darkness. Our house, as did many others, flooded. The next day we could see the great damage was done to the town. How would we ever recover from that darkness? But I remembered the sun rising and shining on the river. I felt its warmth on my face. It seemed to bring new life and hope to all of us.

How often I have been with others through such darkness—a car accident, a death, a serious illness, troubles stacked on top of troubles. But then the light of God's presence and power somehow shone through it all. And lives that seemed shattered started to become whole again.

Many centuries ago the people of God found themselves devastated by a storm of exile and oppression. The storm ended. They went back home only to find it in ruins. But one stood among them and said, "Do not look on these ruins. Look higher! Look up! The sun is rising! That sun is the light of the glory of God, coming to lift you up, to renew you, to rebuild you into a people God can use."

January 11, 2004
The Baptism of Our Lord

Lk. 3:15-17, 21-22; Isa. 43:1-7
Ps. 29; Acts 8:14-17

Baptism?

When I am preparing a sermon, I always read the Bible passages very carefully many times. I look and listen for those themes and thoughts that seem to

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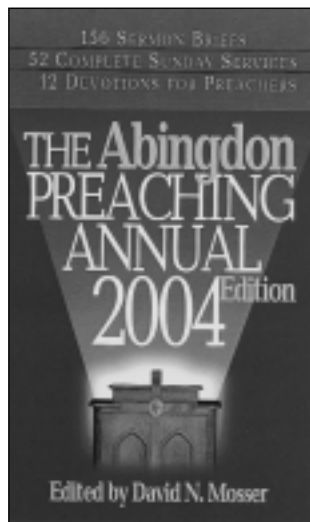
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stand out and speak to me. I hope that what I find meaningful then can be shared with you in a meaningful way.

This week I have reflected on the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. The overwhelming thoughts I kept having were in the form of questions:

Why was Jesus baptized?

John's baptism was for the repentance of sins. Was Jesus a sinner?

And what is baptism anyway? What does it mean?

Do we have to be baptized? Are we "lost" without it?

Does the mode or method of baptism matter?

Why do we as United Methodists practice infant baptism?

Baptism often raises a lot of questions. It is a strange rite; some might even say weird. Some of the things we do and teach in church are not very easy to understand. So, I have questions about baptism. Bet you have too. So today I want to ask some of the questions I have had and some you have asked me, trying to find some answers, but knowing that we will never fully comprehend it and hopefully will grow daily in our understanding of what it means for our lives.

January 18, 2004 2nd Sunday after Epiphany

1 Cor. 12:1-11; Isa. 62:1-5

Ps. 36:5-10; Jn. 2:1-11

Work Together

I learned much about life and the church from Boy Scouts. One day, on a camping trip, the guys in our troop found some old abandoned train tracks. We played a game—see who could walk down a rail for the greatest distance. Our scoutmaster had been looking at us. He suggested we play a new game. He told us all to get on both rails and see if we could figure out how to walk them together rather than just as individuals. Well, we worked at it for a time and most often just ended up falling. Then he suggested we lock arms with the persons on the rail opposite us, leaning in just a little, and also holding onto the shoulder of the person in front of us. And though it took some effort, we started to walk those rails together. That night, around the campfire, the scoutmaster asked us what we

learned from that experience. The answers came rapidly—teamwork, holding onto one another, using our gifts and abilities, supporting one another, being a team.

In today's epistle reading, Paul, the great scoutmaster that he was, is trying to teach the same lessons to the Corinthian Christians and to us. To be the church is to hold onto one another, to be a team, to value each other's gifts, and to work together to carry out the mission Christ has entrusted to us. If we can learn this, our true Scout Master would be most pleased.

January 25, 2004 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

1 Cor. 12:12-31a; Neh. 8:1-3, 5-6,

8-10; Ps. 19; Lk. 4:14-21

The Orchestra

When I was in elementary school our class went over the high school auditorium one day to hear the North Carolina Symphony. The orchestra was hidden behind a velvet maroon curtain. We could hear them warming up, tuning their instruments, a sound I had never heard before. Suddenly, the curtains opened and there on the stage were men and women all dressed in black. I noticed several nationalities among them. They sat in sections—strings, wind instruments, brass, and percussion. I saw so many different kinds of instruments I had never seen before and could not identify. I remember pondering how all these people could play their instruments together without it sounding like chaos. But then the conductor came out and what wondrous music they made together.

I have come to realize that the church is an orchestra too. It has one Conductor, many musicians and many instruments. Each has been given a different musical gift to contribute and a different part to play. But even an orchestra also has persons who:

- set up the stage
- act as ushers in the auditorium
- sell tickets
- advertise and
- do many other things.

And all of them are as important as anyone else. Each needs the other. Though we have different parts to play, if

we stop and listen to one another, we will discover that we are playing the same symphony and directed by the same Conductor who wrote it. And that when we play it together, instead of just our own part in our own little section, it makes music so glorious, so moving that it can touch and transform the world.

February 1, 2004 **4th Sunday after Epiphany**

Jer. 1:4-10; Ps. 71:1-6
1 Cor. 13:1-13a; Lk. 4:21-30

When the Call is Made, the Power is Given

Not long ago we got the Super Nintendo Video Game System at our house. One of my favorite games was Super Mario Brothers (*bold it up*). It's challenging and a lot of fun. I played it recently and realized why it was so much fun—no matter how often I've played it, I always discover something new—a new level, treasure, or some new ability that Mario can use to complete his task. I'm still finding things I did not know were there.

Then I realized that this has been even truer for the Bible. Have you ever read and studied a passage all your life and then, one day, you suddenly see something there you had never seen before? And you say to yourself, "That's so simple and so wonderful. Why didn't I see it before now?"

I have made such an experience this week as I studied this passage from Jeremiah, a passage I have read many times before. But not until now have I really seen the exciting, liberating truths here. In fact, this passage has become for me the last part of a puzzle that had been missing. As I mediated on it, a whole pattern of truth throughout the Bible began to take form. This pattern, this life-changing truth is summed up in the title of the message this morning: When the Call is Made, the Power is Given! Whenever God called a person to some task, God also provided all that person needed to carry out that task.

February 8, 2004 **5th Sunday after Epiphany**

Isa 6:1-8 (9-13); Ps. 138
1 Cor 15:1-11; Lk 5:1-11

Unworthy, But Called

The more you read the Bible, the more you see common themes throughout it. One such theme is how God calls persons to certain tasks and almost without exception they say, "Who, me? I'm not worthy to do that." That's what we heard Jeremiah say last Sunday. And here once again we see this in our readings for today—persons who were unworthy but were called anyway.

Isaiah feels called of God to go to the people as God's messenger. But he feels unclean, unfit for such a calling. Paul, though he had persecuted the church, is encountered by the risen Lord and called to his service.

Jesus calls Peter, in the Gospel reading, but he feels that he is just too sinful a man to even be in the presence of the Lord.

All of them called. All felt unworthy, unqualified. But that did not matter. They were cleansed, accepted, forgiven and called anyway. And maybe it was their very sense of being unworthy that made them the very ones God could call and use. Maybe it's difficult for even God to use those who feel so worthy that they will not really depend on God.

What about you and me? We are called to serve the Lord also. But maybe deep down inside we have been resisting, feeling that we just are not worthy. That does not disqualify us. It helps prepare us to be the servants God needs. Then we can trust God to provide for us what we need to do what God asks.

February 15, 2004 **6th Sunday after Epiphany**

Jer. 17:5-10; Ps. 1
1 Cor. 15:12-20; Lk. 6:17-26

Roots

"They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit" (Jer. 17:8; Ps 1:3).

"Roots." That's the title of a popular book and TV series years ago by Alex Haley. It's about the history of a black family all the way back to Africa. Those roots were strong and long.

"Roots." For those who work in the soil, they know roots make for life. Without roots, plants, trees and flowers cannot grow. Roots go out and find the nourishment that keeps them alive. Roots also provide support as the plant stretches toward the sun.

Jeremiah compares us to plants and roots. He says that we have a choice of where to spread our roots. We can choose a desert, with its heat and infertile soil, or beside a stream of never-ceasing water. Our roots in a desert could search far and wide, never finding the life-giving nourishment we need. But beside a stream, the roots go to abundant water, so that we grow strong and tall, and bear much fruit.

Jeremiah is talking about faith, about trust in God. To trust in God is to choose to sink our roots into rich soil, soil in which we will find all we need to live the joyous and fruitful life God desires for us. Why would we choose a desert when we can have a place beside the stream? Why would we place our ultimate trust in anything or anyone other than God?

February 22, 2004 **Transfiguration Sunday**

Lk. 9:28-36 (37-43); Ex. 34:29-35
Ps. 99; 2 Cor. 3:12-4:2;

The Great Preview

You've gone to see a movie. But before it starts what do they always do? Right? They show you clips from movies that are coming soon. "Previews of Coming Attractions," I believe they are called. They are shown, of course, hoping that you will like what you see, will remember them and come back and see them when they do come out.

Previews. Pre-view. It literally means to "see before," to get a glimpse of something that has not yet happened, is yet to be, but will happen.

I would suggest to you that this is exactly what is happening in the strange reading this morning from Luke—the Transfiguration. I think this is a key to understanding it - for in a mountaintop theater Peter, James, and John are sitting, having followed Jesus there. Suddenly, the

lights dim; and sights and sounds are all around them. The clouds, like a giant movie screen, are before them. And the screen comes alive.... Jesus is there in the middle, but they had never seen him this way. He was changed, glowing, dazzling in brilliant, blinding light. He was transfigured before their eyes. They see him, previewed, as he would be—the risen, living, glorious Lord! They were privileged to get a glimpse, a preview of Easter weeks before it came. The sad words before of Jesus about his death gave them a clip only of Good Friday. In those glorious clips shown on the mountaintop that day they got a preview of what lay beyond Good Friday for Jesus and for them. □

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