

I. Intro. *(silently walk around straightening decorations, plants, altar cloths, etc.)*

Are you a perfectionist like me? Do you have an innate sense of neatness and propriety that makes you want to put things away or tidy up anything out of place? As a kid when I got up out of the swiveling chair in our living room, I couldn't exit the room until I had re-aligned the chair exactly perpendicular to the wall.

But even now, when I play a board game, I find myself frequently straightening up the sloppy pile of draw cards in the center. At work I sometimes go crazy with multiple tasks, getting distracted from what's at hand because I see a page with typographical errors I want to quick correct, and then "Oh yes!" a phone call I need to make before I forget, or some loose papers that need to be filed and pretty soon I haven't even started my major tasks for the day. *(Now a disclaimer: Anyone who has peeked into the clutter in my office would say that I'm either a liar, or I've let go of some of that perfectionism!)*

Even if you're not such a perfectionist, you may be one of those people with a keen sense of right & wrong, of justice & injustice. You're the kind that can't stand to watch investigative journalism shows on TV because you get too upset. You're sitting in stop-and-go traffic and some arrogant yahoo rushes around to the front of the line and tries to cut in, and then the concept of "road rage" doesn't seem so ridiculous to you. You're someone with a well-defined conscience ...

II. (Setting Things Straight)

A. People of conscience instinctively long for "the rough places to be made smooth and the crooked straight"

1. Some of us can identify with John the Baptist
 - a) Well, maybe not the eating locusts part
 - b) But we identify with John because that's how he thought, with a well-defined conscience and a need to make things right
2. John's whole way of thinking and living were focused on setting things straight and getting everyone ready for the One coming who was greater than him.
3. Getting things ready ... is our task, too, at this time of year

B. So it's to Advent & Christmas that we fully turn our attention in worship, although we've been singing Advent songs & lighting Advent candles for 2 weeks already

1. For 3 and half months now in our Year Of The Bible we've been on a survey of the *Heilsgeschichte*, God's interpreted salvation history which comes to us in the Bible
 - a) Early on we talked about the sin problem that came on the scene soon after God created the world, the creatures and us

humans

b) Through four fall stories, we saw how sin separated us from God & ourselves, from others and from creation

2. Then over several weeks we saw what God was doing to solve the sin problem:

a) creating a shalom covenant people who would follow God's ways with God as their only king ...

b) a people who would be such a light to the nations that other peoples would want to believe and serve this God Yahweh

3. Finally, we saw in repeated stories with multiple political configurations how God's people kept disobeying and not following God's ways

a) Despite God mercifully rescuing them again and again, the people's sin led to concessions on God's part to allow them to have human kings and fight wars for God, something far short of God's ultimate will

b) The rollercoaster cycle of the people's faithfulness and unfaithfulness continued through an exile away from their homeland and a return back there, which still didn't bring the shalom fulfillment they had expected.

c) Then as Lyle described to us last week, there came a time of about 400 years when the great prophets stopped prophesying and to some it seemed like God was silent.

d) Although silent, we know God was never absent, and Jewish history was rich with struggles of faith, identity and political independence leading up to the time of Jesus of Nazareth.

You might say it's as if we boarded a train on Aug. 31 ...



not a BNSF train but the YOTB train

- e) Our first route was the “Old Testament Express”, covering a lot of territory in a limited amount of time
- f) In fact, most of our trip this fall was more like the Japanese bullet train



whirring thru the countryside & only slowing down in some cities to recognize specific landmarks & to hear a few short stories behind

these interesting places we passed by

g) But now it's as if we transferred off the bullet train and onto a 3rd class train like those Janette & I rode in Egypt 25 years ago



This train rumbles along more slowly and stops at every station, with windows that are stuck open ... where you share space with common earthy people and sometimes a chicken or a duck

4. For 4 Sundays now we will not be summarizing the biblical message in sweeping categories like we did with the salvation history this fall ...

a) Because the Heilsgeschichte timeline has to cover a few thousand years, the story of Jesus Christ is shown there with a shorthand referred to as the Christ-Pentecost event

b) So now over a period of almost 5 months, we're going to slow the train down and expand out that Christ-Pentecost event so that we catch more of the details of the most crucial 80-90 years of salvation history

c) So this brings us back now to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ:

C. How can we prepare the way for the Lord ... straighten the paths? I have 3 suggestions, but none of them have to do with putting up decorations or baking peppernuts

III. 1st: Let us see the wilderness in the midst of all the Xmas trees!

A. Renowned preacher William Willimon tells the story of a

friend of his who pastors several churches in Africa. *(The same story could almost be told substituting members of Church of the Brethren congregations in Nigeria today, only their situation is far worse)*

By William's estimation, this man had suffered greatly in recent years, with his country going through terrible turmoil and political repression. His friend had even been in prison for a time. So when he came to the US on a visit, Willimon went out of his way to welcome him.

But he was surprised when the man's stay was ended and they were talking about the desperate situation to which he was returning. The friend surprisingly said, "Actually, I have more sympathy with your situation." Willimon wondered, "My situation? Political enemies aren't persecuting my church. None of my pastor friends have been jailed for their convictions. My people don't suffer from pervasive poverty. How can this be?"

The man went on to say, "There is just so much here. You have so much freedom, so many things. What is left to offer people? What needs do they have for which the gospel could be fulfillment? I have greater respect for those of you who preach the gospel and who minister in the situation of North America. There is so much, so much fulfillment and so little emptiness. The gospel feeds upon emptiness."

Like Willimon, I think we need to take this African brother's critique seriously. Where, indeed is the gospel in settings where most of us have bellies overflowing, datebooks crammed with appointments and unbelievable freedom of choice everywhere we look?

B. The 1st task we have in settings things straight for Xmas is to take stock of the wilderness we live in & don't even realize it!

1. "What wilderness?" you ask. We are operating in a moral and spiritual wilderness, all the while being lulled to sleep by a comfortable, sensuous, material paradise
 - a) We're surrounded by more comforts, more luxuries, more choices, more convenience, more privacy than any generation before us
 - b) Indeed, is there much emptiness on a physical level in this town? There is some in our local community but it's hidden to most of us in our churches
2. We like to repeat the old adage, "It is better to give than to receive."
 - a) Sometimes we really do unselfishly model that phrase:
 - The personal visit or gift taken to someone in the hospital ...
 - the trucks & labor needed to help someone move to another

house

b) But when Dec. 26 comes around, how many of us get asked the Q "Did you have a good Xmas?" What does that Q really mean?

If we're honest, we realize that we often measure if it was a "good Xmas" more by what we received and the food we ate and the fellowship that blessed us ... than by what we gave to others.

Think about it: How often have you heard THIS answer to that Q:

I had a great Xmas! You should have seen the joy on my kids' faces opening their presents, and on Xmas Day I helped serve at the community Xmas dinner. This year we sponsored a local child through the Angel Tree. Yes it was great!

C. My point: Let's stop & recognize our spiritual wilderness even as we're surrounded by a paradise of comfort & abundance.

1. Is it really a good Xmas if our holiday schedules make us so hurried and stressed that all our time is spent to benefit ourselves and our immediate families?
2. Is it a good Xmas if we can't recognize in any of our actions the loving and generous spirit of the Jesus whose birth we're celebrating?

IV. 2nd suggestion for preparing the way for the Lord: Pay heed to John the Baptist's message – Repent!

A. We cannot be saved if we've never admitted being lost ... & the ones who know Xmas joy fullest are those who have faced head-on the brokenness of their sin to realize their need for a savior

B. One of the old truths of the Xian message is something often forgotten during this season: **Forgiveness & salvation do not come without repentance**

1. Christmas the secular holiday of lights and gifts will come around every December whether we do anything about it or not. The retail economy and the advertising industry will make very sure of that.
2. But There's no shortcut to Christmas, the specifically Christian celebration of the coming of Jesus our savior into the world
 - a) Jesus cannot be the solution to a problem that we've never admitted is a problem in the first place.
 - b) Salvation comes to those who humbly recognize their need for it.
 - c) There is sin in our lives ... we fail to faithfully follow the way God intended for us to live ... this is why we need the salvation that

Jesus makes possible and why we need to first repent in order to make salvation possible.

3. Jesus himself made this linkage between repentance and the good news that he was bringing:

a) When Jesus grew up and began his own ministry, it tells us in *Mark 1:14-15* that he went around proclaiming good news ... (*read passage*)

b) But an integral part of the same good news was repentance. Just believing that Jesus brought good news wasn't enough ... repentance was also called for, just as his forerunner John had also proclaimed.

C. We straighten the path for Xmas to come by repenting in our own lives ... There are various kinds of sins calling for our repentance this Advent ...

1. Repent of allowing busyness to crowd God out of our activities ... out of our very awareness and consciousness

2. Repent of buying into our culture's notion that the good life is the comfortable life ... the notion that a "good Christmas" = a well-fed, family-renewed, and got-plenty-of-gifts kind of Xmas

3. And this year the tragic events of Ferguson, New York, Cleveland and other cities remind us of the need for those of benefitting from white privilege to repent of our assumptions that everyone is treated equally under the law in this country

a) Earlier this week the senior leaders of some of the largest historically black denominations distributed an open letter inviting their membership, and all Christians in the USA, to show their solidarity with the message that "Black lives matter" by wearing black to church today Dec. 14.

b) By wearing black today, I too stand in solidarity with our ethnic minority brothers and sisters whose lives matter just as much as white lives ... I know that some of you wore black today for the same reason

D. One of the ways, my friends, we set things straight for the coming of Jesus is the simple but oh-so-difficult word: **Repent!**

v. 3rd suggestion: **Make a difference where you can.** It's so easy to feel overwhelmed with all the needs out there ... w/ all the crooked things needing straightening at this time of year

A. Let's learn a bit from a tiny dwarf of a character in a 32-year-old movie

In *The Year of Living Dangerously* John the Baptist figures in the story of a mixed race photographer named Billy Kwan, working in Jakarta, Indonesia. Little Billy has

befriended both the high and the lowly as he works with an Australian journalist. Billy shows the newly arrived journalist the poor people of the marketplace, barely eking out a living. When the journalist refuses to rise to his challenge to offer some help, Billy tells his friend the story of the people responding to the preaching of John the Baptist in the wilderness.

In Luke 3:10 they ask John, "What then must we do?" That question haunts Billy Kwan as he moves daily among so many people who are starving. He tells his friend that he does what he can, not worrying so much about the big scheme of things. He does what he can to help those he meets – in his case, a peasant woman with a sick child.

**B. The 3rd suggestion for setting things straight for Jesus to come:
Do what you can & make a difference where you can.**

1. Support generously the good causes God lays upon your heart to give to
2. Maybe even give in alternative ways:
 - a) There are alternative gifts to give for people who really don't need some other material thing – gifts in their honor to MCC, or Heifer International, the Gideons, etc.
 - b) OR maybe scale back your family gift spending by 10% and give away that 10% in addition to your regular tithing
3. Do what you can by helping your next door neighbor ... or the stranded motorist ... even if their trouble is none of your business
4. Buy gifts that give something back, like fairly traded coffee or items from 10K Villages that pay a living wage to 3rd world artisans

VI. Conclusion

A. Friends, as the salvation history brings us finally to the coming of God's Messiah into the world,



our salvation story journey now takes us on a slower simpler train ride ...

B. John the Baptist reminds us to set things straight as we prepare for Jesus to come

C. We can't level all the mountains & straighten all the paths, but we can

1. honestly admit the wilderness we're living in,
2. humbly repent of our sinful ways,
3. and then make a difference wherever there is one little path that we have the power to straighten.