

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

December 6, 2009
Second Sunday of Advent
Luke 3:1-6

Prayer for Illumination: Prepare us to embrace your presence and your leading, O God of promise. Open our hearts to the words of your prophets, who bid us to journey in your wise ways of justice and peace. Amen.

Make Ready

Every year by the time we reach the second Sunday of Advent, the seasonal hubbub of our cultural Christmas celebration is nearing its peak. Pre-season Christmas sales that gave way to early-bird Christmas sales have passed and we're in the midst of the steady drumbeat of the daily countdown of shopping days remaining until Christmas. Every evening it seems like a few more homeowners have festooned their homes with lighting displays that dispel the darkness and gloom that settle upon us earlier and earlier each day. Festive holiday events abound. Friday night we attended the opening show of "The Christmas Story," playing at the Ellen. Thank you, by the way, since we went with tickets given us by the congregation as a pastor appreciation gift. Bozeman's annual Christmas Stroll last night was picture perfect with fresh snow earlier in the day and cold temperatures which had all in attendance bundled up just like we see in winter apparel catalogs. There were even chestnuts roasting on a propane fire for sale! Christmas concerts by all sorts of school, church and community groups and organizations are taking place after months of preparation. Only a confirmed and conscientious hermit could remain untouched by all the holiday frivolity.

But a flip side, or even for some a dark side, of the holiday merriment and Christmas festivities are the numerous pressures impinging on us. Pressure to create that ever-elusive Norman Rockwell or Currier and Ives Christmas for ourselves and our families. Pressure to keep up with the material expectations for gift-giving and hospitality in the midst of the stark economic realities of the ongoing recession. And perhaps a pressure that can be nearly unbearable for some, the pressure to be happy, to make merry and to revel in the joy of season.

It is no coincidence that this holiday season that attempts to foil the dark skies with lights and the flames of fire happens in this darkest time of the year in the northern hemisphere. There is no concrete scientific or historical evidence that Jesus was born in December, just a few days after the winter solstice. It was early Christian church leaders in the northern hemisphere who appropriated these dark days as the time to observe and celebrate the coming of the Christ child into the world as God's amazing gift that would change the course of history. For the coming of God in Christ would prove over and over again to be a stark contrast to the prevailing status quo: light in the midst of darkness, hope in the thick of despair, and ultimately life in the face of death itself.

Nature itself in the celestial cycles of the seasons provides an amazing context in which we can proclaim the wonder of Christmas—again for those of us in northern climes. By the way, have you ever thought about how different it must be to celebrate Advent and Christmas in the southern hemisphere which is on the cusp of summer right now? A wonderful Christmas movie that you might want to watch sometime that will give you an

idea of this is called *Miracle Down Under*. It tells the story of a family's Christmas in Australia in 1891 in the midst of the dry heat of an ongoing drought.

Even though there is no certainty of the specific date on which Jesus was born, let there be no doubt that Jesus was indeed born, and that he lived on this earth some 2000 years ago. The gospel of Luke goes to great lengths to establish the historical reality of Jesus. In the style of the Old Testament prophets, Luke sets the context of the time in which John the Baptist entered the story. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and . . ." he goes on to make mention of 7 historical figures. (Lk. 3:1) Luke does this not merely because it's an impressive creative-writing-kind-of-way to begin a narrative. Luke does this to make clear to his readers that this Jesus, and John who came before him, are anything but mythic or cultic figures. They are real flesh and blood human beings. It is Luke's intention here to make it absolutely clear that this account of God's breaking into history through the birth of Jesus happened in the real world in real time in a real way that has powerful implications for real people—real people then, and for real people to come in the future, real people like you and me.

So if it is Luke's intention to declare the historical reality of John the Baptist, who proclaims the reality of Jesus who will come after him, it is also Luke's intention to be clear about what this coming of Jesus means. John's quoting of the prophet Isaiah establishes that the time that was foretold in Isaiah's day is now to be fulfilled. As John utters Isaiah's words, the prophecy is being renewed. "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" (Lk. 3:4b)

It's interesting to note that Eastern Orthodox Christians consider John the Baptist to be the last of the Old Testament prophets and at the same time, the first prophet of the New Testament. Even though he is a contemporary of Jesus, and even though he's mentioned only in New Testament texts, they nevertheless see him as a bridge between the other Old Testament prophets and Jesus who came in fulfillment of their prophecies.

The beautiful words of the rest of the prophecy quoted by John resonate with us for they have been words that have inspired great music and art. "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." (Lk. 3:5-6)

Pondering these words this year, I was struck again as I have been many times over my lifetime as a native of this rugged part of the world with the jagged topography of the Rocky Mountains rising up from the Great Plains. The magnitude of the words calling for the flattening of the hills and mountains, and the filling of the valleys is overwhelming and impossible to imagine. Even with the incredible engineering prowess that we humans possess, our attempts to tame and traverse the mountains and valleys continues to stymie and confound us.

I was struck by this anew this last summer when our family traveled the Hiawatha Bicycle Trail in northern Idaho. This bike trail was created after the bankruptcy of the Milwaukee Road Railroad led to its demise in the 1980s. What to do with the miles and miles of railroad right away across the northern US led to the idea of converting a 16 mile section of it to a bike trail. The particular 16 mile section is from the top of St. Paul's Pass,

which is actually underground in the 1.66 mile long, pitch black, Taft Tunnel that bisects the Montana-Idaho line and down the Idaho side through a very isolated part of the northern Rocky Mountains. The rest of the gently descending 15 miles provides an extraordinary opportunity to witness an example of human engineering that tamed, as best as could be done, this rugged and wild part of the world as bicyclists go through 10 more tunnels and cross 7 high trestles. A very complete set of interpretive signs along the way make for a very complete telling of the story that led to how this railroad route was established. I couldn't help but think that those tunnels can be considered human attempts to a mountain being made low, and the trestles as human attempts to a valley being filled. The result of those numerous tunnels and trestles was a route that enabled huge passenger and freight trains to efficiently traverse the mountains thereby connecting the Pacific Ocean with the interior of the country.

While the Milwaukee Road and other railroad and highway routes have built passages through the massive Rocky Mountains, the mountains themselves are still there in all their mighty magnificence. No human power or prowess will ever move those mountains. Cognizant of this, Isaiah's prophetic words that John quotes become even more awe-inspiring as we ponder their magnitude. Those mountains and valleys in our lives that separate us from God that haven't been traversed with a tunnel or bridged with a trestle are done away with in the coming of the one whose birth we will celebrate at Christmas.

And if that's not enough to be packed into this prophecy, there is one more point that Luke is making here—a point that is central to the whole gospel of Luke. It's in the words with which John concludes his proclamation. “. . . and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (Lk. 3:6) Luke was largely written for a Gentile audience—Gentiles being those who are not Jews—which means that those reading the words, “all flesh,” would understand it to mean exactly that. Jews and Gentiles alike are who are meant to be the recipients of God's salvation in the coming of Jesus. This was a radical idea at the time. And it's an idea that remains radical to this day when we consider its fullness.

“All flesh shall see the salvation of God.” That's the promised hope we proclaim in this Advent season. Everyone—those caught up in trying to create that elusive perfect Christmas. Everyone—those who have been swept up in all the hubbub of preparations. Everyone—the one who is alone all year long but feels especially solitary in this season. Everyone—those who have never heard of Jesus. Everyone—those who learned about Jesus but have drifted away distracted by other attentions. Everyone—those who have been hurt by those who call themselves Christians. Everyone—and those who every year in this time look for that mysterious star in the heavens that signals the amazing, incredible and awesome love of our creator God.