



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

DECEMBER 17, 2017
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
EVERLASTING LOVINGKINDNESS: GOD'S JOURNEY TO US

God's Journey to Us: Freed for Righteousness Deuteronomy 30:11-20 ; Luke 1:39-56

During this season of Advent, as we make our way to the manger to celebrate the birth of Christ, we are reminded that first and foremost it is God who makes the journey to us. Thomas Merton wrote, "Our discovery of God is, in a way, God's discovery of us. We cannot go to heaven to find Him because we have no way of knowing where heaven is or what it is. He comes down from heaven and finds us."¹ Out of his everlasting lovingkindness—known as *hesed* to the Hebrew people—God comes seeking us. God makes the effort to journey to us in order to create life for and with us and to offer us a calling in life.

Last week we heard the elderly priest Zechariah explain to his shocked neighbors that his newborn son would not be named "Junior" but "John." He also declared that his child would be a prophet preparing the way for God's Messiah. Today we step back three months to find Zechariah's wife Elizabeth still great with child. She is in her sixth month of pregnancy when her much younger cousin Mary shows up on her doorstep with news of her own pregnancy. For his first prophetic act, the one who will grow up to be known as John the Baptist does a little "happy dance" *in utero* and Elizabeth rejoices for she knows immediately that Mary is carrying their future Lord.

Mary responds with her own celebratory song which we know as the Magnificat because she begins by saying, "My soul magnifies the Lord." As she heaps praise and glory upon God, she speaks as if God has already fulfilled the promises that come with the Messiah. Her words are quite unlike the poetry and prose of most celebrants. She does not talk about conquest and the spoils of victory. Instead, she sings about justice and righteousness, about the world being turned upside down so that the proud and powerful are dishonored and rendered impotent while lowly people like herself are raised to positions of influence. The hungry are filled, the rich become poor, and all those long-awaited promises of God become reality. It is quite a proclamation from a young woman born in an obscure village in the hills of Galilee.

¹Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (New York: New Directions Books, 1961), copyright ©1961 by the Abbey of Gethsemani, Inc., 39; accessed online at: <https://books.google.com/books>.

Mary, this “rose blooming with the Messiah,” knows that God journeys to us to free us for righteousness. Lifting our oppression and overcoming our helplessness, God offers us confidence and strength for the living of these days. Mary’s song recalls the prophecy of Isaiah who said, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor . . .” (Isaiah 61:1-2a). These are also the words Jesus chose to describe his calling in his first sermon in his hometown, a sermon that almost cost him his life that day.

Not surprising, Mary’s words sound familiar to us today. She could be reading the headlines from *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*. Have you heard any news lately of very powerful and proud people getting deposed and shamed? Have you heard of anyone who uses wealth and position to get whatever they want suddenly losing both because someone they exploited as weak finally became strong enough to say “No!”?

What is happening in our country in terms of people who are called to account for their inappropriate and, sometimes, criminal behavior is not accidental or happenstance. Over and over, the Gospel tells us that God cares for the poor and vulnerable, he watches over the weak and disadvantaged. Throughout the biblical story, we see that God journeys to his people to offer them freedom. Sometimes it is freedom from the oppression of a hostile government. Sometimes it is freedom from the overreach of people in power. Always it is freedom from the destructive power of sin in our lives. However, God does not offer us freedom to do anything we want; that is the problem against which we battle. Instead, God liberates us to do what is right—to pursue righteousness and justice. God wants us to live well and in harmony with one another.

This “sweet little Jesus boy” made his way into our lives, not to cuddle and coo but to confront and condemn. This baby we look for in a manger grew up to challenge the religious authorities who burdened their people with petty religious rules instead of unburdening them with the liberating news of the Gospel. He grew up to challenge the practice that perceived power gives us the right to treat other people any way we please. He lived in such a way as to demonstrate that God’s everlasting lovingkindness is the model we are to follow as we seek to live together in this world God has created for us.

In an opinion piece first printed in *The New York Times* and carried in our local paper yesterday, David Brooks wrote about the current environment of politics and culture which he describes as “radical.” The radicalism which is sweeping our world often relies on salacious sound bites that have no reasonable plans behind them. People on all parts of the spectrum—right, left, above, and below—talk about wanted to clear out the dead wood and start over but have no real plan to do anything that will truly benefit humanity. Brooks writes, “Today’s radicalism is fundamentally spiritual, even if it is played out in the political sphere. It is driven by the radical’s need for mer secure identity, to gain respect and dignity, to give life a sense of purpose and meaning.”² He suggests that while these desires are absolutely valid, they are looking to achieve them in all of the wrong places. We do not start to change the world by changing policies that will simply benefit a different group of people while doing harm to other groups. We change the world by living by what is right and good and true. God journeys to us to give us the freedom to do just that.

What does being freed for righteousness look like? Let me share a story with you that was told on NPR’s *StoryCorp* segment last Friday:

It was Christmas Eve in 1967. William Lynn Weaver, 18 at the time, was walking in Mechanicsville, the neighborhood he grew up in Knoxville, Tenn., when he saw a boy gliding down the street on a bicycle.

"Boy, that looks like my brother's bike," he mused.

When he got home, he asked his younger brother Wayne where that bicycle was. "It was down on the steps," he replied. But it wasn't.

The Weaver brothers tracked down where the boy lived — an unlit shack in an alley — and planned to confront him.

"Now, my brother and I, we're going to beat this boy, but my father was there and he said, 'Just shut up and let me talk,'" Weaver tells *StoryCorps*.

An elderly man with a cane answered their knock on the door. The home appeared cold and dark, and he had a single candle for light. His grandson, Weaver learned, was the boy who had stolen the bike.

"He was the same age as my brother, about 10 years old," Weaver says. "The little boy starts crying and he says, 'I just

²David Brooks, “What’s Wrong with Radicalism,” *Rocky Mount Telegram* (December 16, 2017), A4.

wanted something for Christmas." They took the bike and walked home.

"My father tells my mother and she doesn't say anything," Weaver says. "She just starts cutting the turkey in half and all the fixings. She started packing it up. My father went to the coal yard and got a big bag of coal. And then he told my brother, he said, 'You've got another bike, don't you?' My brother said 'Yeah.'" And the three returned to the shack in the alley, this time with food, some coal to provide heat and the bike.

"The little boy is just crying, but the thing that moved me the most was the old man. My father gave him \$20, which was a huge deal back then, and said, 'Merry Christmas.'"

The man said thank you and broke down in tears, Weaver says.

"My father was a chauffeur, my mother was a domestic, so we didn't have a lot of stuff. And that Christmas, I don't even remember what gift I got, but I do know that made me feel better than any Christmas I've ever had."³

Doing what is right is not always reacting with raw strength powered by anger. Rather, it is finding a way to treat one another with respect and dignity. It is assessing the situation before you to determine why something happened and what the real needs are. Living out righteousness and justice is sometimes deciding not to punish a child for taking a bike but to make a way for him to have a bike of his own. Living right does not excuse wrongdoing; it holds us accountable for our actions. It also finds a way to help people learn to make good choices. Living rightly is not doing whatever we want that will give us temporary pleasure. It is doing what is best for everyone that will result in lasting value. Living righteously is being brave enough to admit your insecurities and fears while exposing the person who took advantage of you. It is being compassionate in the face of need so overwhelming that the lines between right and wrong sometimes get blurred. It is sometimes putting our own desires on the back burner in order to make life a little better for someone else.

When Moses spoke to the people of Israel just before they entered the Promised Land, he told them that the life of faith is about choice. It is about choosing blessing or curse, good or evil, life or death. Choose life, he said, and that is what God wants us to do.

³Jud Esty-Kendall, "A Stolen Bicycle Turns into a Chance for Giving on Christmas Eve," *StoryCorps, Morning Edition*, NPR (December 15, 2017).

Whether it is a matter of taking advantage of a woman or respecting her personhood, whether it is a choice to feather our own nest or make it possible for someone else to have a nest of their own, whether it is a perspective that sees other people deserving of the poverty that is theirs or recognizing the potential within them, whether it is regarding other people as a means to my ends or seeing them as a fellow child of God, I have the opportunity to choose to do what is right and good. That is the “work of Christmas” because God has made the effort in Jesus Christ of journeying to me to share this Good News.

Folks who live simply and often on the edge get it faster than those of us who have much more advantage in life. God journeys to us to remind us that we deserve nothing. However, God lavishes us with the gifts of life and opportunity, talents, and abilities. God gifts us with the ability to choose what is right over what is temporary and expedient. God lavishes us with his love so that we know we are endowed with dignity as his children. These are gifts wonderful enough to cause a child in the womb to wiggle with delight and a young woman to sing for joy. In Christ, God journeys to us to free us to live rightly in the world. What joy for us and everyone around us! Amen.

December 17, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

All heaven and earth wait in hushed wonder, O God, to see a beam shining from the star which will lead us to the Christ child. We have spent these weeks watching and waiting in eager anticipation. We have adorned our homes and sanctuary, sung carols, and prepared elaborate celebrations, all in the hope of reflecting the joy of this season and the generosity of your abundant gifts to us.

But we confess, Gracious God, that too often the flurry of activities prevents us from hearing the angel songs of peace on earth. The excesses of food and gifts cause us to miss the good news of justice for the poor and oppressed among us. The obligations and expectations of the season begin to feel like fetters which bind us rather than a proclamation of freedom and joy. And even when we do focus our attention on Advent's promise, we set out, like the shepherds in search of the Holy Child, as if, by our own efforts we will discover him, instead of recognizing that you have already journeyed to us, claimed us as your own, and offered to us gifts of hope, love, joy, and peace to fill and renew our lives. Help us, O God, as we approach the birth of our Savior, to fix our minds and hearts on the beautiful simplicity of his call to love God with our whole selves and to love one another. Help us to remember, in all our gift giving and celebration, that we rejoice today and every day because we have received the gift of your grace Incarnate, the gift of your Son who by his life, death and resurrection has redeemed us and set us free.

Even as we give thanks for your generosity to us, Merciful God, we pray that you would help us not to become too comfortable or so preoccupied with our own circumstances that we fail to see the needs all around us. We ask for your mercy on those who are not able to celebrate during this season. We pray for healing for those who are sick. We pray for comfort for those mourn and ask that you grant peace to those whose burdens seem too much for them to bear. Holy God, reveal yourself to us again in the birth of your Son, that we may show mercy and love to your world and to one another. In the name of the One who comes to us, bringing light to dispel our darkness and offering good news of great joy for all the world, and even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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