

The Gift of the Way

Mark 1:1-8

Last week was the 1st Sunday of Advent and we opened the Gift of Hope, and focused on its color and wrappings. This morning we are opening the gift of “the way”. This particular gift isn’t so visible with respect to its color or how is it wrapped. This gift is best known for its size. When I was much younger I would always look for the biggest gift under our Christmas tree and hope it had my name on it. It is in maturity or with age that we often realize that “good things come in SMALL packages”.

How many of you remember your baptism? Not many of us do and that is because most of us were babies or very small at that time. Yet we are reminded of our baptism every time we participate in the baptizing of another. At our baptisms of water and the Spirit we commit ourselves to a lifestyle, a lifetime of repentance, of coming to love, serve, honor and obey God’s will in our lives. Advent is the first season of our liturgical and spiritual year so that we can begin again, change our routines and receive the gift intended for each and everyone of us. We are reminded of who we are and whom we belong to as we journey on the road that leads to life. Yet regardless of how well prepared we think we are and even if we have a GPS system, sometimes we get stuck on that road or caught up in the traffic if you will.

Have you noticed that there are always problems on road and particularly the thruways? I am not sure if it is because there is so much more traffic or that people just don’t pay attention. The worst kind of

problem is that which backs up traffic for miles and is often experienced at a spot where there are many overpasses of varying heights. Each overpass usually has a posting of how high the overpass is and what you need for clearance, but every now and then one of those big rigs gets stuck under one, wedged in tight and can't move. Nobody seems to know exactly what to do to unwedge it, short of pushing it out the way it entered. Everyone gets out of their vehicles making suggestions that will only create more damage. Then a small child or possibly someone who has special needs, makes the obvious suggestion: let some air out of the tires. Once that is done, the truck, now a couple of inches lower, can squeeze through and continue on the journey.

This Sunday, the presence of John the Baptist calls us to deflate a little so we can squeeze into the season of repentance and lowliness. It takes some letting go, some getting lower on the scale, some deflation so that we can get a truer perspective on our lives and the world around us. We have to learn to see the new heavens and new earth that are already here in the ordinary or everyday: in a child, in community, in disciples, in the poor, and especially those who are different from us. More importantly, we need to do this together. Jesus came to serve, not to be served and that requires community or being together.

There was a pastor who was at a church on a large island, but that was about it ... there was a church building, but not much else. There were a few old souls who came regularly, but most of the younger ones stayed away. They were too busy with their computers, playing electronic games, watching television and attending to their own business. And when the

pastor would inquire about their whereabouts, they would always have an excuse as to why they couldn't be a part of the community. They knew better than everyone else and had other things to do.

So the pastor started visiting them one by one. She would sit by the fire, drink tea and chat about this or that never mentioning religion. The fire would be crackling warm while the wind gusted outside, and the pastor would lean over and take a twig out of the fire. She was careful to take one that was glowing hot and burning well, and she would lay it on the edge of the stone fireplace and let it sit. She'd continue with the conversation and say not a word about the twig. And as they'd talk the twig would cool down; the glow would begin to fade; the twig would smoke and eventually die out. When that happened the pastor would stop in midsentence, look her parishioner in the eye, and put the twig back on the fire, holding it until it caught again. And then she'd take her leave.

First a man got the message, then a woman and pretty soon the story started circulating everywhere and by the end of the month the church was packed.

Advent, just like our baptismal vows, is something we do together. We repent, hope and focus on God's will TOGETHER. We show up and in community become the people God calls us to be! What a gift ... all we have to do is be present.

This past week the presence of Cyndi Stonebraker and Chrissy McCombs resulted in a gift to us all. Now I need to make this clear that it

wasn't their job, BUT it was their ministry. You see there is a difference between the a job and a ministry, but we will save that for another message. Anyway, as you entered the church this morning, hopefully you noticed the memorial baptismal font that was added to our water falls display that we have had since September. What we see is that out of the powerful water of Niagara Falls emerges this baptismal font with a small amount of water bubbling up. It seems like a study in contrasts ... the powerful water of Niagara Falls and this little bowl of water in the baptismal font. We all know that Niagara Falls serves many with water, yet it is this small amount of water coming from the baptismal font that serves all.

Christmas, the gift of a small package, a baby, the Christ child, is more than a date on the calendar. Surely Christmas is more than poinsettias and presents, and parades, and pageants as nice as those are. What places the power of Christmas deep into our souls? What writes the Christmas spirit on our hearts?

It is when we recognize that the essence of Christmas is love, God's incredible love for us, expressed when God sent Christ into the world to save us. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son ...". "Love Came Down at Christmas" ... that is how the hymn writer puts it. That's the answer to our question. Whenever and wherever we receive God's sacrificial love, whenever and wherever we pass it on to others, whenever and wherever God's love is accepted and shared, Christmas is born again!

Jesus shares, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least or the small of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” When we see Christ in other people and love them, then at that precise moment, Christmas comes again. When we love God, when we love our families, when we love other people, there is Christmas. The Christmas gift of the way is God’s love in Christ.

Love such a SMALL word yet such a HUGE gift! Amen.