

The Doggie in the Manger
(Luke 3:1-6)

12/5/21
Rev. Koyama

A Time of Preparation

The Gospel readings and the candles we light during Advent have the purpose of providing us with guidance as we prepare for the birth of Jesus on Christmas Eve. As you may recall, last Sunday we lit the “Candle of Hope”. And the Gospel reading set before us a vision of our world as a place beset with swirling dangers. And we were urged to “Stay awake!” To not allow ourselves to be unaware, as though drunk with daily worries.

The Flame of Love

The candle and readings this morning add another layer of meaning to our preparation. The candle today is the “Candle of Love”, representing that mysterious and holy fire that the Apostle Paul singled out for highest praise.

How can we describe love? In the Bible, it is something we experience as a result of our covenantal commitments. It is the treasure hidden in the field of our labors, a treasure that “neither moth nor rust can destroy.”

When we choose to live responsibly in relationship with others, doing the work of supporting and caring for them in imitation of Jesus, we discover an inner joy and peace that frees and liberates us. And when we have truly learned what it means to love one, we discover that the love we bear extends to all.

This love, which the bible calls “agape” is something other than the infatuations or idealizations that we often associated with it. It involves a sense of deep attachment, that at the same time requires a corresponding non-attachment. In other words, we need each other, but cannot be “needy” with each other. Because being needy inevitably involves becoming pushy.

One of the great learnings of my own life and, I suspect, for many of us, is that there is a difference between love and neediness that we fail to recognize at our own peril. And along with this has come another essential learning; that in letting God take possession of our hearts, all our needs will be met in a way they could never have been met by trying to push others into meeting our needs.

My guess is that the word most often used interchangeably with love is the word “compassion,” which literally means “to feel with another”. It involves the ability to put ourselves in another person’s shoes; to

imagine what they are experiencing. And it involves the desire to address the pain and suffering of the other, because we feel it as though it were our own. So that when we love others, the focus of our lives is less on ourselves and our own need and more on sharing in the experience of others.

The Advent Joining of Flames

So now, as we reflect on love, I think it is worth considering that the light on the candle of love exists in relationship with the light that burns on the candle of hope. The lighting of the Advent candles one after the other and their final coming together in the one flame that is Christ encourage us to think of each of the Advent themes (that you see on the blue banners on the wall) as both separate and as a unity.

And so allow me to share a brief reflection on the interplay between the flame on the candle of hope and the flame on the candle of love.

The Doggy in the Creche

Last Sunday, Jesus told us to be watchful of the world around us and not to allow ourselves to be drunk and dissipated with daily worries as we prepare for his coming. Now, I'm a moderately elderly fellow and I have to admit that I very often sleep walk through situations for this very reason.

But last Sunday as Adeline and I were moving animals from the piano to the creche, I had one of my occasionally alert moments and noticed something out of the ordinary. It was the weight and feel of one of the animals on the creche. "That's odd," I thought, as I looked at the piece. The animal I was holding in my hand was a dog, a plastic Golden Retriever.

It occurred to me that this dog was not a part of the original set; that somehow it had been added in. Could it be that some little boy or girl had added it to the collection? I could imagine a child noticing that there was enough space on the creche to add a toy dog and that it would be nice if his plastic dog could enjoy being a part of the gathering around Jesus too.

Perhaps the child had thought about how the dog would otherwise have just spent all of Christmas lying in the toybox, gathering dust. And feeling sad about that idea, had added the dog to the manger scene, where something interesting was happening. And perhaps the piece was also there because grown-ups, who are very often quick to notice what belongs and what doesn't belong, didn't catch it. So that the dog may now have been there for years, slipping under the radar of adult sensibilities.

Or, perhaps it was noticed and intentionally left there by an adult or two who, with a knowing smile and a twinkle in the eye, decided to give it a pass. Or maybe the plastic dog was put there in the first place by an adult, who acted in a moment of child-like open-heartedness. In other words, the most likely explanation is that, on some level, love has something to do with the reason the retriever is there in the manger scene with the others.

Preparing the Way

The Gospel reading this morning reminds us of the words of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, who urges us to “prepare the way,” and “make straight the path” for the one who is to come. We are to make things level, iron out the crooked places, so that Jesus can move easily and smoothly through, not unlike the way our cars now run so smoothly through, as we drive into Sunderland on Rt 47.

But the pathway John is talking about is the path that runs through our hearts. And the thing that is meant to flow so smoothly and unhindered into, through, and out of our hearts is the grace of God that is coming to us in the form of Jesus.

There are so many ways in which we have put in roadblocks, allowed manhole covers and potholes and all manner of obstruction to block and make crooked the path of love through our hearts. Suspicion and fear, jealousy, ignorance, unwarranted anger, stinginess, an inability to forgive, – all the worries and distractions of the world are like wear and tear on our “heart-infrastructure” that has long been ignored. And we have spent far too much time weaving back and forth, like drunken drivers, cursing at every pothole we hit.

Advent is a time to fix that heart infrastructure and make the paths straight again. And one of the ways we can make the path’s straight is by making it as easy as possible for ourselves and our loved ones to somehow be present at the manger with Jesus, where we can experience together the saving power of the light that emanates from the baby Jesus.

There are a lot of people, sometimes it is ourselves, who feel like they are the odd piece out that doesn’t belong. They feel like a plastic retriever, poorly fashioned and out of place among the gathering of pieces at the manger. It may be that they don’t realize that, in the eyes of God, their very uniqueness, the incongruity that they bring to the scene is the very thing that brings the greatest joy and hope to the scene.

God doesn't want only the preapproved or expected pieces at the manger. If that were the case, all the pieces would be identical. Instead, God is overjoyed with whatever motley crew shows up yearning to be made whole. The manger scene of God has a room for all the pieces, including possibly a Mickey or Minnie figurine, or how about a plastic crocodile or a Pez dispenser with a head on it. In God's love they all belong. And that means, no matter how odd or different we feel, we belong too.

Making straight God's path, is about removing the obstacles that keep God's creation from sharing in witness to the reign of peace and joy that will emanate from the manger in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. May all of creation share in the light of Christ that is coming into this world, and may peace and goodwill reign throughout the earth for ever and ever.