

THE INWARD ARC  
THE PAST HAS PASSED

Texts on Sunday, December 9, 2012

*Luke 3: 1-9*

Prepare the way of the Lord, cries John in the wilderness. *Prepare the way, O Zion!* sang we a moment ago. Within a week or two, if you go again to a church—any church—you will be singing “Joy to the World!” *Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King. Let every heart / Prepare him room.* There it is again. Prepare! Prepare what? A room? Is it so simple as decking a hall with boughs of holly? The bizziness of Christmas festivals presses us toward an answer like that, but we know it must mean something more. Prepare room for Christ? How?

There are two things to do to prepare for Christ. First, see this fact of our nature. Our rooms are all filled up. Every room is booked solid, all day, every day. We tell that there was no room in the inn for Jesus. Hah! When it comes to our stable personalities, there is not room for Christ in our feed trough, not room in the hay croft, not room in the closet or the cupboard or the cup! What’s filling us up? Our thoughts and our judgments. In our ordinary nature, we do get physically empty—hungry; lack of energy; tired. But we are always full to the brim with judgments. We always know how it should be. What other people are doing wrong and what they’re doing right. We judge ourselves, too. Even people who say sheepishly that they’re not too smart are sure they’re not smart. They’re know-it-alls when it comes to self-criticism. Why, we even judge our judgmentalism. We are sure we’re right that we’re wrong to behave as we do. But here’s the thing: Nothing ever changes. All our judgments keep rolling in and out of us like kegs of brew on a beer factory floor. We’re drunk with our thoughts and we have no room for anything but our own cares, our own beliefs, our own judgments, and nothing ever changes. Not out there. Not in here. We need help to see ourselves. The great poet and mystic Jalal al-din Rumi (d. 1273) imagined our need in this way:

The Lion and the Hare came to a well and looked in. The Lion saw his own image: from the water appeared the form of a lion with a plump hare beside him. No sooner did he spy his enemy than he left the Hare and sprang into the well. He fell into the pit which he had dug; his iniquity recoiled on his own head.

O Reader, how many an evil that you see in others is but your own nature reflected in them? In them appears all that you are—your hypocrisy, iniquity and insolence. You do not see clearly the evil in yourself, else you would hate yourself with all your soul. Like the Lion who sprang at his image in the water, you are only hurting yourself, O foolish one. When you reach the bottom of the well of your own nature, then you will know what wickedness is in you.

For this, Rumi writes, “the faithful are like mirrors to one another.” To see ourselves as we are is the first thing to do to prepare a way for the Lord.

The second thing to do is to prepare the room. Clear the way. Empty the clutter. More and more, become an inquirer into the world and its people, less and less one who thinks she knows anything sure about anyone. More a servant of all, less a master of anything. To do this, you must practice emptying yourself of thoughts and feelings and judgments. Not always, but at your own command. Freely. Whenever you choose. True freedom for a human being is not lodged first in liberties or law. True freedom is to live inside the space that exists between what happens and what you choose to do in relation to what happens. This is an empty space. This is where Christ intends to dwell—if you prepare the way.

The practice takes time. Every-day practice is needed. This is the work called prayer and meditation. You say you know your body needs exercise? You are right. But your whole self needs exercise too to grow up into the whole being you were created to be. Your self needs you to get out of yourself in order to see yourself as you are and as you are made to be. Seeing is the thing—not judging, just seeing.

Now, people don’t like to look at how they really are. We’re full of defensiveness, or denial. On seeing our stuff, we react like animals—no freedom, just reaction. We think repentance is a horrible, painful path, and avoid it. This only reinforces our earlier discussion: thoughts and judgments come pouring down out of us every instant. Therefore, we ordinarily have no empty space, no calm, no freedom just to see what is. No Christ within.

But see this. Whenever our mind is turned in judgment and fear on any matter whatsoever, whether in ourselves or in another, we are being consumed by an illusion. Our unhappy thoughts come to us as to a person trying to make her way on a rocky, difficult path which she thinks she should not be on. Our imagination of the path we think we (or someone else) *should* be on appears to us as if through a fog and a thick woods. We feel certain we (or they—or society itself) was meant to be on that path we think we see. We are stung by the thought that at some time in the past, we (or they) behaved stupidly and caused us to fall onto this bad path we’re on, so severely separated from where we’re supposed to be. You wish you could go back. You wonder if your rocky road will ever connect with the right road left behind. Thoughts like this are the substance of all our misery. This is the essence of unhappiness. It is the opposite of salvation. Since the past is past and cannot be changed, it is a kind of hell. It even includes the most horrible aspect that the image of hell portends, namely that an evil in the past will destroy the future. This is the nature of guilt. It is a special kind of fear, that

the past and future are chained together in sorrows, and you have no power to break the link. Now let me restate what I said a moment ago: This is an illusion. You need space to lay it down.

When, in the hope of Christ's coming, you prepare him room, you make in daily practice a little space of complete freedom from the past. When Christ comes, even for a little while, you finally see what is so, without judgment. And you see this: There is no other path through the fog and the dark woods. It was only in your imagination. It was just the noise of your old chattering fears. The only path that is real is the one you are on. Rocky, steep and twisty though it may be, where you are is where you must be. In this space where your vision clears, you see that the past has passed. The future is open. Christ is here. This is the only Christmas present you need.

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