

The Third Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Dr. Hugh George Anderson, the president of Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, tells the story of a time when he was a graduate student in New York City and had to go to a small town in Pennsylvania to interview for a position as a professor. It was a very important interview that he could not afford to miss.

Dr. Anderson checked train schedules and found there was a train that went from New York City right through the town where he had the interview. So he bought his ticket for that train and the next day he boarded the train. When the conductor came by to punch his ticket, however, he said, "My boy, this train doesn't stop in that town where you're going. This is an express train, not a local."

Dr. Anderson said, "But it *has* to stop there! I have a meeting I have to attend this evening."

"Sorry," said the conductor. "We are forbidden by law from stopping there. But there is a way we can work it out. I can have the engineer slow the train way down, and if you'll do exactly as I say, you can jump off onto the platform. Are you willing to try that?" Dr. Anderson readily agreed.

After an hour or so the conductor returned and led Dr. Anderson to the front of the train. He stood with him on the steps of the car and said, "Now the train is slowing down. When I give you the word, you jump. But before you hit the platform you have to start running. If you don't, you'll have a terrible fall. But if you land running and keep running on the platform along side the train, you'll make it."

Finally the time came and the conductor said, "Jump!" Dr. Anderson jumped exactly as he had been told. He landed on the platform running, and he kept running beside the train. As he came near the end of the platform and was slowing down and the train was going by, he suddenly felt a strong arm around his waist and he was pulled back up on to the steps of the last car of the train by a second conductor. As the train picked up speed, the second conductor said, "My boy, you almost missed this train!"

This story, which Dr. Anderson insists is true, illustrates the simple fact that very often when we think we have finally arrived at a destination, we are swept off our feet and forced to continue on to

another. Life has a way of going on despite our efforts to land and settle down at some station along the way. Life may slow down a little like the express train in the story, but as often as not it picks up speed again and takes us right along with it.

In today's Gospel John the baptizer is in prison. He had preached to the multitudes and baptized hundreds of people in the Jordan River as a sign of their repentance. But now he was in prison, held there by Herod, who felt threatened by John's popularity among the people. For John, life was slowing down, in a sense. He knew that his death was probably near. He began to wonder whether his preaching was in vain, or whether perhaps there was in fact one coming after him who would carry forward the mission of God in history. So John sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus whether he was the Christ. And Jesus sent them back to John with a description of healing and refreshment—and even resurrection. “Go and tell John what you hear and see,” Jesus said. When that message came back to John, it was clear to him that the life of God's work in the world would go on beyond John's imminent death. The repentance John had preached was not a destination, but a station along the way, for beyond repentance there would come the grace of the Gospel itself.

So also the people who had followed John no doubt thought that when they had heard him they had heard it all. Somehow their response to his preaching, their repentance, and their own baptism was a more or less permanent landing for them on their journey through life. But it turned out that it was not. Life had delivered them into a new era through the preaching of John, but it had not deposited them forever on a station platform of permanent peace and wholeness. John helped them jump off the train, but Jesus swooped them back onto it and demanded that they continue their journey beyond the place John had delivered them.

Life does sometimes slow down a little, but it picks up again soon after. We may jump off onto a platform of complacency, but as often as not we will find ourselves brought right back on board, whether we like it or not. I can see this in my own experiences in life. I thought getting married was a destination, but it turned out to be only a station in life that led on to other things. I thought having children was a destination, but it swooped me back into the process of life in ways I never could have anticipated. I thought ordination was a stationary platform in life, but it was only a passing depot that led to self-expending ministry. I thought that coming to be pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church in 1968 would afford me a more or

less quiet and peaceful place to land, but it turned out that this church has consistently kept on moving both in growth and ministry to its parish and to the world.

On a deeper level, my faith never quite seems to arrive at a permanent place, either. I experience grace. I name it as grace. And I say to myself, "Now at last I have absolute clarity about grace." But then you know what happens? Life goes on and I find myself getting caught up again in legalism and moralism, until the next time grace strikes.

Now if that is true for me, I suspect it is also true for many of you. You have found that places in your life you thought were permanent destinations turned out to be nothing more than way stations, as life swooped you back into its historical process.

Some years ago *The New Yorker Magazine* had a cartoon in which a hippie is shown rushing up to the information counter in Grand Central Station and asking, "Who am I? Where am I going? When will I get there?" That same sort of anxiety strikes us at times. We feel as though we don't know who we really are or where we're going or when we'll get there. Life frightens us because it seems to offer us no permanence, no final destination that means anything to us. For some of us at times, the choice in life boils down to either constant fear and anxiety or else numbness to everything. And to be sure, we are surrounded daily by anxiety-bearers and by zombies, where both have decided that life is not livable the way it is.

But there is another option beyond sheer anxiety or zombie-ism. The other option is faith. Cynics make faith sound trite, but cynics do not have the last word on anything, when all is said and done. A cynic is someone who wants to hope but is afraid to hope, much the way adolescent boys make fun of the very girls to whom they're most attracted. In that sense even cynics bear witness to the validity of faith and hope.

Faith is the option God gives us in the midst of doubt and uncertainty. Faith is simply trusting that God knows what he's doing even when we don't. Faith is having the flexibility to land with both feet running on whatever platform we come to, and yet at the same time to let ourselves be swooped back up again into the flow of life itself when that happens. Faith is saying yes to life in spite of the no that is spoken by the world. Faith is accepting life as an ongoing train that is longer than we are and energized by power we cannot fathom. Faith is appreciating those who have gone before us and trusting

those who come after us, knowing that the hand of God guides all of them even as it guides us here and now.

Today we will install the forty-fifth church council in the life of Christ the King Church. Church council is like a platform where people land for a couple of years and then move on. It takes as much faith for a pastor to trust a church council that is new every year as it takes for a church council to trust any pastor. But the church goes on, not by the goodness of either its pastors or its councils, but by the grace of God alone.

Today we will baptize a little girl, Savannah Jane Stait, whose mother, Robin, was baptized a generation ago in our church. Life goes on, and baptism is like landing for a brief time on a platform, only to be swooped up again into the stream of time. Baptism is a kind of brief pause that then propels us forward once more toward our ultimate destiny with God. Baptism is like taking a leap and then having the Final Conductor put his strong arm around us and lift us back up on to the train of life.

Life *is* like an express train. Platforms come and go. Generations rise and fall with a tide that carries everything forward. We live then by faith—faith that both time and space are in God's hands, faith that every landing in life may be only a platform for launching us into the future, faith that regardless of the state in which we find ourselves, there is hope in those coming after us, hope grounded in the one who came before and will come again, Jesus Christ.

Originally preached in 1989