

The Second Sunday in Advent

Malachi 3:1-4
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

For several years the Southampton Civic Association and other community groups have been talking about the need to put speed humps along Rice Boulevard from Greenbriar to Sunset and Main. After all, the speed limit there is thirty miles an hour. Yet people often drive thirty-five or forty along this beautiful, oak-canopied boulevard. Speed humps are needed to keep people from driving so fast.

Several weeks ago at a meeting of the Rice community, our city council woman proposed that we formally request the city of Houston to resurface Rice Boulevard. She pointed out how the street has deteriorated with large cracks and offsets in the pavement. She said that driving on it is becoming more and more hazardous. Almost everyone at the meeting agreed with her, so the decision was made to ask that Rice Boulevard from Greenbriar to Sunset and Main be improved and smoothed for vehicular traffic.

I found it ironic that a street that needs speed humps also needs to be made less bumpy. The way it is right now, you wouldn't want to drive much more than thirty miles an hour, because the street is so bad. So let's smooth it out so we can all drive forty or fifty. And then let's put in speed humps to force everyone to drive thirty.

In this story we have a good illustration of how the world operates. The world makes a rule to improve life for people, but then it finds it has to make another rule to redefine or counteract the first rule. Laws are passed by state and federal legislatures to improve things in our society, and then more laws have to be passed to set limits on the original laws. We see this in the Texas Constitution and the U. S. Constitution. We see it in the Internal Revenue Service and in the Immigration and Naturalization Service. We see it daily in the halls of every deliberative body from the highest to the lowest in our country. The world tries to make life better by making rules, only to find that one rule requires another, and another, and another, *ad infinitum*.

In the Bible there are four Gospels. Only two of them mention Jesus' birth. But all four of them tell of John the baptizer preparing the way for Jesus. For these writers, it would seem that John's preaching is more important for understanding the Gospel than the story of Jesus' birth. In the first three Gospels—the Synoptics, as they are called—direct reference is made to John being a voice in the wilderness proclaiming that a new road is being built so that God can come to his people. Drawing on the prophet Isaiah, these writers declare that in John the baptizer a straight and level road is now under construction in preparation for God coming to his people in his son Jesus Christ.

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

What is the point these Gospel writers are making in all of this? The point is quite simple. We cannot go to God. Therefore God comes to us. The road is not being built for us to travel on our upward journey to God. Rather, it is being built for God to travel on his downward journey to us.

We make little progress when we try to go to God along the road of morality, because no matter what we achieve, there is always much that we do not. We can make rules for ourselves about being nice, about being more ethical in our daily lives, about attending worship regularly and reading the Bible every day. But these rules only lead to more rules when we find we do not live up to the original ones. The minute we think we are well on the road to spiritual and moral improvement, we find ourselves sliding off into the ditch of despair. The minute we think we are making progress in our self-improvement, we discover that we are only spinning our wheels alongside the road.

The point the Gospel writers are making is that the road being built in the wilderness is a road for

God to come to us, not a road for us to go to God. As long as we think we can go to God and that we can do it all by ourselves, we are stuck in the ditch. The simple fact is that we cannot go to God. But God can come to us. And that is exactly what he does in his son Jesus Christ, who comes to forgive us for our foolishness—yes, our sinfulness—in thinking that we can go to God on the basis of our religiousness, our positive thinking, and our goodness.

You will recall that in Jesus' encounters with others, he was most often resisted by the good people, the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees, who all figured they were doing pretty well by themselves. They were living decent, moral lives in relation to God and neighbor. On the other hand, the tax collectors and prostitutes—the obvious sinners—had no illusions about their goodness. They knew they did not measure up to God. They knew that on the great highway to heaven they were stalled at the entrance ramp and could go no farther.

In other words, these sinners repented. To repent is to say, "I cannot do it by myself." As long as you think you *can* do it by yourself, you have not repented. And if you have not repented, then you have not received forgiveness. You still think the highway is something you can travel to God and you resent any implication that God has to come to you.

In his book *Hunting the Divine Fox* Robert Capon describes well the contrast between the way of the world and the true mission of the church. He writes:

"The church is not in the morals business. The world is in the morals business, quite rightfully; and it has done a fine job of it, all things considered. The history of the world's moral codes is a monument to the labors of many philosophers, and it is a monument of striking unity and beauty. As C. S. Lewis said, anyone who thinks the moral codes of mankind are all different should be locked up in a library and be made to read three days' worth of them. He would be bored silly by the sheer sameness.

"What the world cannot get right, however, is the forgiveness business—and that, of course, is the church's real job. She is in the world to deal with the Sin which the world can't turn off or escape from. She is not in the business of telling the world what's right and wrong so that it can do good and avoid evil. She is in the business of offering, to a world which knows all about that tiresome subject, forgiveness for its chronic unwillingness to take its own advice. But the minute she even hints that morals, and not forgiveness, is the name of her game, she instantly corrupts the Gospel and runs headlong into blatant nonsense.

"The church becomes, not Ms. Forgiven Sinner, but Ms. Right. Christianity becomes the good guys in here versus the bad guys out there. Which, of course, is pure tripe. The church is nothing but the world under the sign of baptism."¹

Robert Capon has said it well. The sign of baptism under which we live is the sign of repentance. The sign of baptism is the sign that we have given up all hope of going to God on our own, but have instead allowed God to come to us in his son Jesus Christ to bring us forgiveness and hope. The sign of baptism is the sign that while we are obligated to do what good we can in the world, we acknowledge that whatever good we do cannot save us in any final sense. It cannot bring us closer to God.

Once we are clear on that, we are ready to celebrate Christmass as the true miracle it is. Not that a little baby was born in humble circumstances and later grew up to be world famous. Not that sheep and donkeys and straw and shepherds are so sweet and cute in a candlelit stable. The miracle of Christmass is that God so loved the world that he sent his only son to travel the highway long-promised by the prophets, so that God could come to his people and redeem them from their sin. The miracle of Christmass is not that the world has accomplished great things by building smoother boulevards and then obstructing them with speed humps just to show everybody who's boss, but that God has accomplished something which the world cannot, by taking on human flesh and dwelling among us. The miracle of Christmass is in God coming to us where we are, so that we might be with him forever.

Originally preached in 1997

¹ Capon, Robert *Hunting the Divine Fox* (The Seabury Press, New York, 1974) 132-133