

MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

**The Marvels of Mapquest**

Luke 3:10-15

Mapquest is a beautiful thing! You simply go to your computer, find Mapquest or a similar guidance program, put in your address, put in the address of your destination and viola, the map comes up on the screen with directions that will guide you to the place you want to go. I love it. I use it regularly. It is so much easier than trying to read the tiny print on a map while you are driving in the car. When we went to Mississippi on the mission trip in November, my companion on the way had a hand-held navigation device. Now that was amazing! There was this lovely voice that tells you when you should turn and when you have missed a turn and when you need to make a u-turn. Once you have put the address information into the device, you do not even have to look down at it again. Should you decide not to take the recommended u-turn to get you back on the right path, the device will actually begin to re-calculate your progress and offer you an alternative path to reach your intended destination. Ah, technology, it has the ability to frustrate at times, but it can be so delightful when it works and makes life less complicated.

We continue our Advent journey toward the birth of God in our midst. Certainly, the journey has been complicated by snow and ice and wind. Unfortunately, Mapquest will not actually get us where we want to go. The best I can tell, Mapquest will not allow you to put in a starting address in this country and an ending address in another country. Of course, there may be an international site that I have just never used. But the reality is that the journey of Advent is truly a journey of heart, mind and soul and that journey takes more than Mapquest or any guidance device can provide.

In today's scripture passage, John the Baptist or John the Baptizer as he is sometimes known is preaching, preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus. He is drawing a crowd and in the process becoming a threat to the Jewish religious authorities and Roman magistrates of his day. His message is clear and often harsh. Repent. It is a small but powerful word. Repent. In our tradition it means to turn, to change life, to turn toward God. To a people who believed that they were set apart by Yahweh and that their inheritance as God's people was delivered through their family tree, John the Baptist demands a personal, all-consuming choice for God. He becomes a voice in the wilderness. His voice is loud and strong telling us that we are not born into grace, but must choose grace for ourselves. Should we refuse to make that choice, we are as good as dead. To use his language, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor': for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to

Abraham....every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Harsh words for the third Sunday of Advent. Harsh words on a morning when we have just lit candles of hope, peace, and joy. Yet, his words ring in our ears this day. Repent; turn toward God. This is our challenge each and every day. It is a word that holds both a sense of judgment and wisdom. We would not be gathered here this morning if we did not think there is wisdom in turning toward our God. It is a wisdom of generation after generation. The wisdom is choosing to live in the light of grace with our God here and now and eternally. Turning toward God is the wisest choice of our living. But the people gathered with John that day were unsure how the turning toward God would become evident in the living of their days. “What should we do?” they asked. “What should we do?” we ask.

His response is not what I would expect. I would love to hear a kinder, gentler word from John. I would love to hear, “pray for your neighbor”, we can do that. I would love to hear, “sing hymns with your fellow pilgrims on the path of faith”, we can do that. I would love to hear, “visit the sick, be kind to the poor, comfort those who mourn”, we can do that. But no, John gets down to the very reality that we find so difficult to accept. Talk to us about my prayer life, fine. Talk to us about social justice, yes, but talk to us about money and we become defensive.

He says to us this very day, “If you have two coats, share one.” Are you kidding? I have a half dozen coats of one sort or another. And by the way, I live in Indianapolis, Indiana. I need a variety of coats. How about you?

He says to us this very day, “If we have food, share it.” Well, of course we have food. We have food at least three times a day every day plus all the times we eat in between meals. We have plenty of food, and we are called to share it.

He calls to us to live off what we need and share the rest. Do not cheat or hoard or prize your money to the point where another is diminished. These are not words we want to hear. They are about a generous mindset and if you will, lifestyle, not just in the season of Advent, but as a way of life.

I would rather speak about my prayer life thank you very much. Yet, John understood that until we are ready to release our control over what we have materially and monetarily, we will never become vulnerable enough to trust fully in our God.

In the early 1990s on a bit of a whim, I said to the wonderful congregation I was serving in California that I was thinking about going to the Holy Land and I wondered if anyone might want to go with me. That very Sunday, enough people signed up to fill a trip. Suddenly, my musing became a reality. So, early in January we set out for Israel. It was an amazing trip. There were many awe filled moments on that trip for me including our stop in Bethlehem. We arrived at the Church of the Nativity early one

morning. As we stood on the plaza area at the entrance to the church we needed only to look to the nearby surroundings to see a mosque with the half moon on the spire and a large Star of David both within a brief walk. It was humbling to stand in such an ancient place and be surrounded by the presence of the three faiths of Abraham. As we walked toward the Church of the Nativity we were stopped and asked to get in a line. There were several tents erected in that plaza and one by one we were taken into a booth, asked to remove our clothes down to our underwear and a young soldier with an automatic weapon patted us down in search of weapons. It was the first and only time that has ever happened to me. I felt humiliated, vulnerable and a little afraid. It was a necessary process if we were going to go into the church. I was glad to get through the "check point" and back at Randy's side. I remember saying to him that I hoped the church was worth going through the checkpoint. I assure you it was.

We made our way into the Church of the Nativity and amazingly a worship service was being conducted. The Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox religious calendars are slightly different from the western Christian calendar. And so, on the very day that we were touring the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Israel, the Armenian Orthodox tradition was gathered in celebration of the birth of Christ. It was Christmas in that tradition and Armenians had gathered to celebrate their Christmas day. The male priests were dressed in long black robes with black headwear and black veils. I had no idea what they were saying, but the liturgy included bells and incense and smoke. It was mysterious and unfamiliar to me and yet, it was beautiful and filled with blessing all at the same time.

Our tour moved alongside of the service and went down into the area that is believed to be the birth site of the baby Jesus. Not a stable at all, but rather a grotto hewn into rock, where we stood in wonderment. Twice while we were in that sacred space, the Armenian priests moved through with incense, smoke and chanting. It almost felt like an out of body experience for me. I kept thinking what an amazing moment, to spend Christmas, although it was Armenian, in the birthplace of God. There I stood holding the hand of the love of my life in that holy place. I could barely breathe because it was so overwhelming for me. I could see the lips of the guide moving, but I have no recollection of a word that was said. I was transported to another dimension.

Upon reflection, I realize that grotto may or may not have been the birthplace of Jesus. It is a place designated as such, but who knows? It was not the place that transfixed me; it was actually the vulnerability to holiness that led me to that moment of transformation. I became vulnerable as we were searched before entering the church. I became vulnerable in the midst of a service that was foreign and mysterious to me. I became vulnerable as I stood on what had been clearly consecrated as holy ground.

This journey of Advent is a journey to the holy. It is a journey not so much of footsteps as it is of heart, mind and soul. It is a journey of wonder and ultimately of

vulnerability. John the Baptist understood that humanity would not be open to the teachings of Jesus unless we were willing to become vulnerable, willing to repent, to turn fully toward the Divine and release our compulsion toward control. He speaks not of those things that we are willing to release with some ease, no, he goes right to the heart of that which we have the most fear, the most need for control, the most self-centered mono-vision...money. When we allow ourselves to become vulnerable with money in the name of Jesus, we will truly come to a new place in our living and our faith.

Advent is a journey of vulnerability. Mapquest, as marvelous as it is, will not guide us where we want to go. Breaking down our need for control, stripping down to the essentials of our heart and soul will deliver us to this Divine birth. And in so doing, we will find we stand in the presence of the holy not only in a grotto in Bethlehem, but also at the bedside of a loved one in a nursing home, or in the halls of a hospital, or in a line at the mall, or on the street corner waiting for a green light, or in the car, in the shower, in the kitchen. Any place where we become vulnerable to the Divine we will find that we are standing on holy ground.

Have a second coat? Give it away to one who has none. Food on your table? Share it. Be just and honest when dealing with money. Put your living toward producing the good fruit in your life. For in stripping down to the very basics of our living, we become ever more dependent upon God in our midst and in so doing, we live as the disciples of one who ensures our life here and now and eternally. It is a choice--this life stance of generosity and vulnerability. It is a choice for hope, it is a choice for obedience, it is a choice for life in abundance here and now and life in abundance eternally.

In the beautiful Christmas carol, "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" there is a line that says, "the world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing." Imagine the vulnerability of the world, quiet, listening for the song of the angels. It is when we listen, when we are truly open to hearing and seeing God in our midst that we will fully realize the power of the birth to transform our living, to offer us hope for this day and every day and to change the way we think and live.

Repent, turn toward God and continue the journey to Bethlehem, knowing, expecting, anticipating new life in the birth of Jesus.