
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Straight or Crooked, Rough or Smooth:
Which One Are You?

A Sermon by

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Scripture: Luke 3:1–6

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There is not a straight road to drive on in all of Costa Rica. That may be somewhat of an overstatement, and I apologize to those who know the country far better than I do. I was only there for five days.

Just after I had scheduled Monica's and my trip to Nicaragua for the dedication of the church and community center in La Flor, I received an e mail invitation to a family wedding in San Jose, Costa Rica. When I was in seventh grade (a long time ago), my brother Kevin was a senior and we hosted an AFS student from Costa Rica, Marco, who lived with our family for a year. Lo, these many years, we have kept in touch and still consider Marco and his family 'our family'. My sister and her family have been going to Costa Rica since 1985. They adopted their two boys from Costa Rica. I had never gone and when the invitation came to go to Marco's daughter's wedding, and I was going to be in Nicaragua at the very same time, I thought, "I am this close; I may never get to go again." So I changed my return airline ticket and booked a ticket on TICA bus lines, from Managua to Costa Rica, a nine-hour bus ride. It was a real bus, big, air conditioned, bathroom in the back, not a chicken bus, pretty much an express. But, man, what a ride!

Costa Rica has a chain of mountains down its spine so you are constantly going up the mountain, down the mountain, around the mountain, even through the mountains. I survived the bus ride. Only to be driven around San Jose the next day, again, no straight roads, and no street signs to tell you what road you might be on. The next day we went up another mountain into the Rain Forest, where it was not raining, but pouring. The next day we went to the beach. How do you get to the beach? Over the mountains, of course.

It is a beautiful country. Rain forests. Volcanoes. Beaches. Costa Rica has been named the "greenest country in the world". The country has announced plans to be 'carbon neutral' by 2021. Eco-tourism, bio-diversity, and being green are their focus. They abolished their standing army constitutionally in 1949, and spend about \$18 per person annually on their police corps. I remember Marco saying to our family 40 years ago, "Our Navy is three rubber lifeboats."

The country is not without struggles however. The global and American economy has had a huge impact. \$15 million beach condominiums started a year ago have been abandoned, two-thirds of the way into their construction. No tourists.

They have a huge immigration population from Nicaragua, especially people who cross the border to do the jobs the Costa Ricans do not want to do—sound familiar—but who tax the free healthcare system. Jobs are scarce these days. Drugs.

Cost of living. They have a Presidential election coming up so the billboards say, “I’ll be tough on crime.” “Won’t be bullied.” “No more corruption.” “Working for the working people.”

Now imagine you live in Galilee around 70 AD. There’s a war on. Some radical Jews have revolted against Rome, and Jerusalem is under siege. Reports are that conditions in the city are bad. People are divided. Everyone is anxious. The price of oil is skyrocketing, olive oil, that is. The world is in turmoil. Where do you look for the Future¹?

You look backwards, of course. To look to the future, you look back to your roots. So the Gospel writer Luke, following the example of Mark, looks back to the scriptures of Israel, to Isaiah, to another time when the future looked bleak, when there was despair and very little hope in their lives. “Prepare the way of the Lord.”

Prepare does not mean just sit there, does not mean whine loudly. Prepare means to make beforehand, to have a plan, to work out the details, to procure what you need before you need it.

If you are having a baby, you prepare for that baby. There are now Baby Planners, a new industry, just like Wedding Planners, who make all those hard decisions for you. Which stroller, car seat, crib, college, IRA or stock transfer? (I don’t think they do all that.)

If you are going to have an operation, you prepare. You talk with your health team, you Google your options, you put your support team and your prayer team together. You put your personal and spiritual house in order.

If you are you preparing for the Lord, for a Messiah, for a Savior, for God, for a presence, for a Prince of Peace, for peace on earth goodwill to all, you prepare.

Imagine not only preparing for war. Imagine preparing for peace.

Imagine not only preparing for terror strikes. Imagine preparing for acts of kindness.

Imagine not only preparing for yourself. Imagine preparing for all the children of the world.

¹ Feasting on the Word. P. 44

Garrison Keillor told a marvelous story once. He described a vast meadow in the mountains of Montana, and a rugged, free-spirited cowboy riding on a horse across an ocean of prairie just as the sun was setting. He stopped near a group of wild buffalo, tipped back his hat, and said this: “Look at you, your hair is all matted and stringy, your tails are filthy, your feet are clogged with dung, and your breath stinks. You are truly loathsome creatures.”

After he rode away, one of the buffaloes looked at another and said, “I don’t know about you, but I’d say we just heard a discouraging word.”

Sometimes we think church should be the place where never is heard a discouraging word and the spiritual skies are not cloudy all day.

Sometimes we think that church should be just like the malls where we shop, where holiday music keeps us in the stores longer to spend even more money than we really have.

I believe that people come to church, come to be part of faith community, come to find sanctuary, some sacred space set apart from the world, a place set apart to experience something deeper, larger, more mysterious, more frightening and ultimately more redemptive than success.²

“Prepare the way of the Lord” is not a discouraging word. Prepare the way of the Lord is vision word. It is an adventing word. God is saying to us, again, “I am coming. I will be present with you. I will be meeting with you, journeying with you, feeding you, quenching the very thirsts of your lives. Meet me at the table. Meet me in your neighbors. Meet me in your enemies. Meet me in those people you have decided are ‘straight or crooked’, ‘rough or smooth’. In the times that you feel most vulnerable, I am there.”

The good news of this Gospel from Luke is in all those names of places that we can hardly pronounce: Iturea and Trachonitis, Lysanias, and Abilene (and not Texas). Those were the territories that Rome controlled, the provinces governed beyond Israel. Today we would call them Syria and Jordan, Iran and Iraq, Lebanon to Damascus. The good news is that “the good news is not our little secret, our private possession or privilege. The Good News is for all God’s children. It is not for just one people or one kind of people, or one nation, or one time in history, but for all of us,

² Rev. Robin Meyers, “On Having a Larger Vision” Eden Seminary Commencement Address, May 18, 2007.

every nation, and every age.”³ It is good news that we are called to share. We are meant to invite others in. We are meant to take the good news out. You might be surprised. I always am. People are hungry, starving really, to the point of death, for really good news.

I thought I had invented a word “adventing”, but I Googled it and found a woman’s blog called “Adventing”. Listen to her words: “Advent is a summing up time for me—a time when I look back at the year behind me and see it as a whole cloth. I do this while on what seems like my annual “Walk to Bethlehem, my journey to Christmas—which for me is always a journey to the manger. Some years I have barely been able to crawl there—years with grief and sorrow that robbed me of joy. But still, I got to the manger—to that place where I understood what Christmas really is—and I found comfort there. To me, the manger in Bethlehem feels like “home plate”. When I get there, I will heave a sigh of spiritual relief. Until then, I feel adrift on a journey that has just begun, swept along by the throng and not yet conscious of directions or goals.”⁴

The manger is “home plate”. How do you get to home plate? Not always by home runs, sometimes a single, once in awhile a double or triple, sometimes you get there by someone else—across home plate by a sacrifice fly. And the most important word in crossing home plate? Safe. Amen.

³ *Preaching through the Christian Year C*

⁴ <http://timesfool.blogspot.com/2008/11/adventing.html>