

II Advent

December 6, 2015

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Baruch 5:1-9

God has ordered that every high mountain be made low.

Philippians 1:3-11

It is my prayer that your love may overflow.

Luke 3:1-6

Every valley shall be filled.

Last week Julie was managing our church office when a man came to ask for help. He said he had made some bad decisions that caused a financial mess for him. He wanted to speak to the pastor. On Friday he came back, and I met with him. He wanted more than financial help. He needed to talk about the decisions he had made that hurt people, and even caused him legal trouble. They were decisions that cost him his job, and then because of the conditions for his dismissal, no one else would hire him. Within months he was homeless. Now he was doing some consulting work; he has a studio apartment; there are promises for more steady work in January; and he is taking full responsibility for everything he has done wrong. He asked me to invest in his turning his life over: really, practically, hour-by-hour, over to God. He is a Christian; and he felt that was the only place left for him to get help was churches. Some churches sent him away. I helped him with money from your discretionary fund donations to me, and we talked a lot.

You and I each have a path between ourselves and God. God wants that path to be straight and level; He wants us to have direct access to Him. John the Baptist echoed words from the prophet Baruch, when he said that **we** need to make that path straight. God already offered a straight path, but we have a way of putting curves and U-turns and potholes in that path between ourselves and God.

For our visitor last Friday, life and bad decisions and losing a job had put him on a winding path that were taking him away from his life goal, not toward it. And life can sometimes feel like it forces a winding path that goes in the opposite direction from where we want to be going. But we can and should work to straighten our path. For our church visitor, he knew he needed more help than he could pull from within himself, and even more than what other people could do for him. Our Lord is helping him change on the inside; he told me that he knows he needs to depend on God to get him back on track, and he sees that happening.

You can make the path to God straighter by immersing yourself in God; spending quality time with Scripture, and prayer, and faithful people.

Like our visitor with legal and money problems, you can make wrong choices that box you in; where you feel like you can't get out, that you are stuck in a place you know is dysfunctional, saps your energy, wastes your time, and saddens God that you are in a hurtful relationship, or addictions, or cheating, or greed.

But it is possible to fill those potholes in life. We can ask God to help us get on a smoother road. Jesus can do that for us, giving us the determination to follow the

counsel of John the Baptist. The word John used is ‘repent’; which literally means to re-think the choices you are making. I’m sure you have heard the saying, “doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result, is the definition of: insanity.” But how often do we do exactly that?

Where you know you are making the wrong choices, it isn’t enough to only be sorry. You have to re-think, re-direct your life in that area; there need to be changes made.

If you are learning a new skill, like woodworking, you might have tried to sit down and read a book about using different wood working tools, making wood joints, and about finishing wood surfaces. Eventually you find the project you want to take on, and you find a friend who already has the skills you want to learn. Filling the potholes in life needs to be handled with the same deliberate strategy.

As we look for Jesus to come into our life every day, we need to work on the road that connects us to him. John pleads with us to make a straight path for Jesus to get to us, to use us, to empower us to live our life in keeping with God’s purpose.

Jesus having been born into this world on Christmas Day, only has meaning for us TODAY if we are expectant and waiting and ready for his arrival and presence in our life every new day. Otherwise Christmas is only the secular holiday about gifts being advertised on TV and in most of the mail that comes to our home now. But you and I KNOW that is not what Christmas is about. The heart of John’s message is that God will move heaven and earth to help us get to Him; filling valleys and lowering mountains if necessary. But we still have to prepare the way.

For the short remaining 2 ½ weeks of Advent, think about the curves and potholes you may have put in the pathway – or allowed - that connects you to God, making it harder for Him to take residence in your mind and soul. Be intentional about preparing your heart for Jesus to arrive into your life in a new way; to a new level; with a higher immediacy, being part of every decision you make, and every action you take.

This is the time for us to prepare ourselves, and to invite God to help us re-think what just did not go the way it could have gone, or the way it should have gone. This is a time to re-think, re-do, or un-do anything that could cause us to miss the mystery and power and grace that can come THIS Christmas with a fresh arrival of Jesus into your life. That personal arrival of Jesus Christ himself is the true meaning of Christmas. May we all be at work, preparing the way. Amen.