

Sermon (with Time for Children) for December 9, 2012 “Getting Ready” Isaiah 40:1-11 Luke 3:1-6

(Time for Children)

Frank was 79 years old. For twenty-nine years, since he was fifty, he'd kept a strange kind of Christmas list. He called it "My Refinement List," and he kept it a secret. Then one of his grandchildren found that year's piece of paper, and asked what it was.

"Oh that," Frank said, a bit vaguely, "that's a special Christmas list." The boy asked him, "Is it what you want?" "It's not that kind of a list," Frank answered. "Is it what you're going to give other people?" the boy pursued, wishing he could read. "Well, no, it's not that kind of a list either."

Then, groping for words to explain something he felt was important and wanted to pass on, Frank lifted his grandson into his lap. "A few weeks before Christmas I just write down a few things I'd like God to help me get rid of, like selfishness, or being impatient with your grandmother, or wanting too many things for myself. I figure the more I get rid of things like that, the more I'll be able to rejoice in the good things God gives us all." (Source uncertain)

Sermon

Advent is our season to prepare for the Gift God gave us long ago through the birth of Jesus. Today you can hear folks worrying that Christ has been left out of Christmas as merchants are coached to say “Happy Holidays” instead of Merry Christmas so as not to offend non-Christians. The larger worry, in my opinion, is that those of us who are Christian fail to prepare our hearts for Christ to enter and change us from the inside out. A few years ago a woman was complaining about Christmas having little meaning for her. Here are her words: "Maybe God did do something great 2000+ years ago, but the only place Christmas has any power these days in my life is in my bank balance!"

In Isaiah 40, read by Perry a few minutes ago, the word is that we should “in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” In Luke 3, Gospel-writer Luke carefully described the wilderness setting that was part of Jesus’ life: the Jewish people were being ruled harshly by the Roman emperor. Conditions were harsh. But John the Baptizer, who was Jesus’ cousin and a radically religious guy, came out of his wilderness yelling at everybody that they had work to do since God was right then fulfilling the promises given centuries before through the prophet Isaiah: Make big changes in your life, because really soon you are going to see your salvation!

The rest of this sermon is drawn from a story I came across, entitled “Prepare Ye the Way.” It was written several years ago by Pastor Sarah Foulger of the First Congregational Church in Camden, Maine.

*Ernie’s mother was making him go to church. He did not want to go, and intended, therefore, to make it perfectly clear that this was not his choice, that he was going against his will. Ernie was fourteen, and he was quite certain that no other fourteen-year-old he knew would be in church,*

*that none of his friends had parents who made them go to church.*

*“Church is boring,” he complained to his mother. When this produced no reaction, he continued, “The music is boring. The minister is boring. Only old people go to church.” There was little reaction from his parents. “You might be surprised,” his mother said. “Try to go with an open mind,” his father suggested, winking at him. Ernie grunted.*

*The drive to church was uneventful. Ernie’s mother tried to engage him in light conversation, but, as an effective part of his ongoing protest, Ernie delivered short monotone answers to her queries.*

*“It’s a beautiful day, don’t you think, Ernie?” “It’s OK.”*

*“When was the last time we went to church?” “Last Christmas”*

*“Actually, I think it was two years ago, on Christmas Eve,” his father amended.*

*“Do you think the same minister is still there?” “Probably.”*

*“I think Wendy Larkin goes to this church.”*

*“Doubt it,” Ernie answered, but privately he grew slightly more enthusiastic about the whole operation and was glad he had not worn his jeans with the holes in them, which he had thought about doing. Wendy Larkin and Ernie had been in the same classes since second grade and he had a long-standing crush on her, which was, apparently, no secret to his mother.*

*As they pulled into the parking lot, Ernie could see that the lot was filling quickly. There seemed to be children everywhere heading for the main doors of the building. With a note of sarcasm gently aimed at her glum son, his mother said, “Look at all these old people.” ...*

*Inside, Ernie was surprised by how bright the church was. He remembered it as being a shadowy place, but then again, it had been a while. Church was, at worst, a bi-yearly event for Ernie’s family. His understanding of church was largely gleaned from television images of it. He imagined church to be “spooky,” “guilty,” “severe,” and “gloomy.” Maybe he had never been in church on a morning before — that was probably it.*

*The sanctuary was nearly filled, and, to make matters worse, Ernie and his parents had to sit in the second row, right up front. Ernie slunk into his seat, let his head fall onto his chest, and folded his arms over his stomach as if to say, “Just try to get through to me; just try.” Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Danny DiNotti, and slunk down even further into his self-imposed cocoon. “Danny de Nut,” the kids at school called him, and sometimes “Danny de Nothing.” Danny was probably the least popular kid in the eighth grade. He was a new kid in the school who had moved here from California, “where all the nuts come from,” Ernie’s friend Tyler had said. Nobody talked to Danny. Who would?*

*There was something wrong with Danny's foot, and he walked funny and could not do much of anything in gym class. Ernie remembered someone telling him that Danny had been born with a club foot — whatever that meant — and that his foot had to be totally reconstructed, but that it would never be a normal foot. Ernie was sure that whatever a club foot was, it must be terrible, and he was glad he had not been born with one. He felt sorry for Danny and all, but he was not about to destroy his social life by being nice to him. Stealthily, Ernie glanced over at Danny again and thanked God that Danny had not yet noticed him sitting there.*

*While the organ played something that Danny recognized as suitably tiresome for church, he imagined saying, "Told you so" to his mother. He felt vindicated. Church is boring! His mind wandered back to Danny de Nothing, and Ernie hoped he could make it out of church without having to say anything to him. Once, back in September, Danny had sat down at the same lunch table as Ernie and had offered him one of his snack cakes. Ernie had accepted the treat, and it was a full two weeks before his friends had stopped ridiculing him for befriending Danny de Nut. Ernie was determined not to let that happen again.*

*The music stopped, and an old man who reminded Ernie of his sixth-grade teacher began to speak. Ernie turned to his father and mouthed the word, "Boring." His father whispered to him, "Your vocabulary needs some fresh material." Ernie glanced out the window and noticed a small flock of tiny birds resting on the branches of a nearly bare tree. They looked cold, pitiable, and they appeared to be looking directly at Ernie. It was weird. His father nudged Ernie to stand up for the opening hymn. Ernie didn't know the song but pretended to sing, being sure to keep his face hidden in the open hymnal just in case Danny happened to look over his way. Everybody sat down again, and the man introduced something called the prayer of confession. "What do I have to confess?" Ernie whispered to his father while staring at the prayer in the bulletin. "You'll think of something," his father replied. Ernie read the prayer along with everyone else in the room:*

*Dear God, we hear the words, "Prepare the way of God," but we do not know how to prepare. We hear you cry, "Make the rough places smooth," but we do not know how to do this. Forgive the obstacles and rough places we place in your path and in the paths of our neighbors. Forgive our handicapped hearts. Forgive the hurt we bring into one another's lives, and teach us to prepare for the birth of the Christ child into our hearts again this season. Amen."*

*"Forgive our handicapped hearts." The words hit Ernie like a surprise math test. They dug themselves into his young conscience, presenting Ernie with one of those rare and holy moments of revealed truth. Ernie, quite suddenly and very unexpectedly, felt sorry - deeply sorry - for the hurt he had caused Danny. For the first time, it dawned on him how thoroughly awful and alone Danny must feel. Ernie imagined himself with a club heart, a heart unable to beat properly or to love properly, even as Danny's foot made it impossible for him to walk like everyone else.*

*Ernie's eyes were drawn to the window again, where he watched the small birds fly away. In his own fledgling soul, he had experienced the judgment of God. He prayed silently, "Forgive my handicapped heart. Forgive the hurt I have brought into Danny's life." It was not an*

*earthshaking “Damascus Road” experience, but it was significant. Most mountains are made low and most valleys filled not in an instant but over a period of time.*

*“Peace be with you,” the pastor said, and suddenly people were getting up and offering words of peace to one another. Ernie sat startled, listening to the words reverberate around him. “Peace be with you...and also with you..” He was surrounded. Staring at his bulletin, Ernie suddenly realized that someone was standing in front of him. He looked up, and there was Danny meekly saying, “The peace of Christ be with you.” “Thanks...uh, you too,” Ernie stammered. The words felt awkward, yet somehow right. This wounded boy, who had every right to hate Ernie, had offered him peace.*

*The sermon followed the same theme, “Prepare the Way of God.” Ernie yawned his way through the part about John the Baptist being part of a strict Jewish sect, but he did listen surprisingly closely to the part about inner preparations. He had always thought of Christmas preparations as being outer things — garlands and wreaths and ornaments and such. The preparation the minister was talking about was different. It had to do with being cleansed on the inside, turning and walking in a new direction. It had to do with being forgiven. He found himself believing that it was possible for the crooked within himself to be made straight, and the rough ways smooth, and his own handicapped heart strengthened and mended. And if a Christ child was to be born into human hearts, he imagined that he could probably make room in his own heart. Probably.*

*Ernie honestly did not know what to make of Holy Communion, except that it kept bringing to his mind the snack-cake episode. Then, at the end of the service, after another hymn which Ernie did not know, the minister stood in the back and said, “Prepare the way! Make straight in the desert a highway for our God! Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, the rough places a plain. Then the glory of God shall be revealed.” Then he added, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”*

*On their way home, Ernie’s mother said, “I guess I was wrong about Wendy Larkin. I didn’t see her there.” “Yeah,” replied Ernie. “Who was that funny kid who came over to you during the service?” “A friend,” answered Ernie. And they went home to continue their preparation. (Adapted by FTE from a story in *Yards of Purple*, United Church Press, 1999)*

May our hearts become open to paths for our own preparation. May the rough places of our lives that cause hurt or shut us off from the joy of this season be straightened out, bulldozed down, and smoothed so that we can receive our Savior and be his messengers of hope for others in this world. By the grace of God, we can get ready! Amen.