

Isaiah 53:4-6
John 3:13-21

DISOBEYED

We come now to the part of Advent that many people in our culture want to shy away from, at first. It is, however, an integral part of preparing for Christmas. Without it, many of the blessings cannot break through to us. It comes dramatically in Isaiah (40:3), and was the main theme of John the Baptist: *“Prepare ye the way of the Lord.”*

Getting “the roads ready” is what Advent is mostly about. Advent before Event. All worship has this dimension to it. Only, the Incarnation – the coming of the Great King – heightens the necessity. If Christmas is real – if our Messiah is really coming – then we need to make preparations.

It is not a complex, mysterious point. At least we wouldn’t expect it to be. It is the Boy Scout motto. Normally when guests are coming, we like to clean the house up a bit and have some special food planned and ready. Even the most casual kind of worship requires preparation: bulletins; candles, and who is going to light them; flowers; ushers; cleaning up the sanctuary ahead of time; getting the patio set up and the coffee perking. How embarrassing it would be if some Communion Sunday, nobody remembered to prepare it. It is a constant hassle, but most of us hardly notice, until somebody goofs.

On a slightly different level, humans have always known that before coming into God’s presence, we must purify ourselves. We do not keep all the purification rites required in the Torah, but is that because we have lost all respect for God, or because we think some of them are no longer required?

Do any of you still wash your hands before sitting down to eat? You tell your children it is because of germs. But we have been washing our hands before eating for thousands of years, and most of us have only known about germs in the last hundred. During most of recorded history, humans gathered at temples to eat sacred meals with God. Even when not at the temple, humans felt grateful to be able to eat, and so they thanked God for their food. It used to be called “grace.” Jesus asked His followers to remember Him every time they ate or drank. Hands were washed as a purification before encounter with God, even in a common meal.

Saturday night baths and dressing up to come to church were a way of life for most Americans through the first half of this century. It was only a symbol – an acknowledgment – that we needed to keep “cleaning things up” before coming into God’s presence. More important was the inner purification – the purification of the heart.

It used to be that boys and girls were taught to connect what they expected, or at least hoped, to receive at Christmas with their behavior during the year prior to Christmas. Had they been obedient to their parents, helpful and cooperative around the house, reasonably good to brothers and sisters? Were they studying diligently, doing okay in school, not getting into trouble? I can clearly remember, as a boy, analyzing my behavior as Christmas approached, hoping maybe exceptional behavior in the last six or eight weeks would offset earlier offenses and carelessness. There was no doubt in my mind that the presents under the tree were connected with my behavior. Of course, there was no doubt in my father’s mind either. It was no figment of my imagination.

Did that make Christmas less exciting? I think the reverse. Did that make me feel less loved when I got good presents? I think the reverse. Did that make Christmas seem more connected or less connected with real life in my young mind? You have three guesses.

Is there any parent alive today who would withhold Christmas presents from an undeserving child? No, we want Christmas to represent the free gift of God’s outpouring grace and unconditional love. Do you really think young children understand ethereal theories that have no connection with anything they do or care about? Once each year we dump all this stuff on them, whether they have been incredibly wonderful or whether we can barely stand the little monsters. And from that they are supposed to deduce the love of God and the meaning of life?

Every year at Christmas time, I hear endless remarks pretending offense or even scorn at the commercialism of Christmas. I do not take it too seriously, since it seems to have little or no effect on the cash registers or credit cards. But I keep wondering: As Americans, even as American Christians, do we have something against commerce? I love buying presents. I wish I could buy a lot more of them. I do not have anything against commerce. Like most of you, if you gave me unlimited resources, I would love to buy some really wonderful presents for every single person on earth who tried to make life better for others this past year. I think we should stop complaining about commercialism, and complain instead

about meaningless commercialism and immoral commerce. And everybody who makes toys that do not do what they are supposed to do ought to have to spend January in jail. And everybody who gives presents to people they do not like or children who do not behave ought to have to spend February in jail.

Suppose we all grow up knowing we have to help in the preparations for Christmas: we have to obey our parents; get along with each other; help with the cleaning and cooking and decorating; start thinking of things we can do for or give to others. That's pretty good on a child's level. If anything is mentioned about the birth of Jesus, that is even better. But for adults, it gets deeper. It does not jump track – unless you start thinking about Easter – but it gets a lot deeper and heads for mystery beyond our knowing. There are deeper preparations. How do we get the inner roads ready? There are preparations we need to make that we are not quite sure how to make. There are things that need cleaning up, and we are not sure if that is even possible.

They came to John the Baptist to be washed in the Jordan River. You can feel the hunger ... the longing ... the desire for a better, truer life. How do you get clean after you have lived in this world for a few years? How do you prepare for the coming of the Holy One?

There are two great realities to Christmas that we hate. They are connected. One is that we can never get sufficiently ready to receive such a visitor. We are not and never can be worthy for God's Messiah to come visit us. It dawns on us eventually that He comes precisely because this is true – precisely because we cannot get worthy – precisely because we need Him so desperately if we are to go on with LIFE. But that awareness comes later. Initially, we always try to get ready, try to be worthy – even pretend we are just fine whether He comes or not.

This sets us up for the second reality that we hate. His character and being are a light that reveals our flaws. He does not do it to be mean. We learn that later too. It just happens. Light casts shadows. We cannot stand what we look like when He is around. All our mirrors are in rooms with ten-watt bulbs ... until He comes. We thought we looked okay. We thought we were getting away with it. It turns out that He sees beneath the surface, to identity and destiny and value we never dreamed lurk within us. But we do not know that at first. We think He judges us like we judge ourselves and each other. And when His light illumines our lives, we cannot stand the reflection. We end up rejecting Him. We will do almost

anything to get away from Him, at first – or to get Him away from us. He understands why even better than we do – even when it takes Him to the Cross.

One of the things His light reveals is our disobedience. We have never loved or obeyed God. Oh, we have done a few things – we have tried in our way to be good and religious and responsible and moral and all. At least at times. It suddenly looks pretty pathetic, anemic, and half-hearted ... in the LIGHT that comes from His life. All my life I have been playing Chopsticks. I even thought it sounded pretty good. Then He comes along playing the Hungarian Rhapsody, Mozart, and Beethoven with full orchestra. How was I to know that such things were even possible? But at first I do not notice the smile, or His beckoning. I only know that I have worked really hard at my Chopsticks and now He has made it sound silly. It is a really hard decision for us humans: Shall we follow Him until we can play Beethoven, or kill Him so we can go back to pretending that Chopsticks is really beautiful, or at least as good as it gets?

The disobedience is not His fault, even though we blame Him for it. The disobedience was here long before the Incarnation. It has been ruining life here, and we have been choking on it, since Adam and Eve first discovered free will and turned it in the wrong direction. But disobedience never looked so clear and ugly until He came. So He gets blamed for it. That is always the other side of Christmas. It is reflected in the stories – in the gift of myrrh; in the actions of Herod; in the flight to Egypt; in the manger itself, and no room in the inn. And we all have our own stories to add to them.

Many have tried to take this dimension out of Christmas, not only for the children, but for everyone. Insofar as they succeed, Santa looks and behaves more and more like Satan: red suit, hearty laugh, instant gratification ... all reeking with temptations that promise everything and deliver a “high” that lasts almost a week, but leave us “another day older and deeper in debt.”

The reality is that there is judgment on the earth for as long as we are disobedient to God. It operates everywhere. It is not some special kind of punishment. Creation runs according to the Creator’s design and purpose. Nothing can or does go right here for very long if it operates against the Creator’s design and purpose. That is the meaning of The Fall; that is the meaning of The Flood; that is the meaning of The Plagues of Egypt. Christmas does not bring these problems. Jesus does not bring

trouble to a world all loving and peaceful until He came. Nothing can or does go right here for very long until the judgment is lifted – until obedience is restored. We usually prefer to call it reconciliation – restoration of trust – conversion – reestablishment of relationship between us and God.

Meanwhile, the loving God goes on loving – offering salvation and redemption, as always – but the judgment still stands. Meanwhile, the world has killed the Son, and for the most part it has not acknowledged the deed, or repented, or even bothered to say “I’m sorry.” The judgment is not just God being a poor sport or a sore loser or seeking vengeance. If that were the case, we would not even be here. There would not *be* any “here”! Clearly God has not given up on us, but the judgment still stands. Where could it go? Take it away and there would be no rhyme, reason, or hope anywhere.

So the Son was rejected, and that judgment stands over the world. We can each change that, but only in our own hearts and lives. Is that not how Christmas still comes? The real one? YOU can get ready. YOU can wait and watch. YOU can receive Him and turn back to obedience and reconciliation with God. But you can only do it in your own life. You cannot do it for your children. You cannot do it for your friends, or your spouse, or your enemies. And please know for an absolute fact: Most of the world around you is not doing this – it is not turning toward obedience to God. If you are obedient in a disobedient world, you are at terrible risk. This does not turn us away – He is worth every second of it. But we do need to know and remember. That, also, is part of the Christmas story.

What follows is pure myth of my making. It has no basis in historical fact, but is only my way of trying to tell the truth.

I sometimes try to imagine what would have happened if the world had recognized Jesus’ true identity and welcomed Him as the rightful King. You know, King Herod saying, when they finally met: “Oh Jesus, I can’t tell you how ashamed and sorry I am. I have been a bad Jew and a rotten King, and nothing is going like it should. Please, I’ll do anything you say. Show me how to be the King I am supposed to be ...” and so forth.

Why was it so impossible for Herod, and all the others, to receive Jesus in this manner? I have only to think of my own response to Jesus to understand. The judgment of the rejection still stands. The world cannot have the peace and love of the Kingdom – until it is willing to obey the King. The blood, sweat, and tears keep mounting up – to more injustice,

sorrow, pain, and death. No one here escapes, because the world itself turns away. No punishment is appropriate or required. To reject this King is its own inherent punishment. The Kingdom does not come. There is no way to embellish such a loss.

We are living today in the time of “the third chance.” The second chance was lost on a Good Friday long ago. We suspect God knew all along that it would come to this. Jesus seemed to have known too, by the time He was halfway through His ministry. But my myth picks up at the zero hour, when Jesus realized that it was hopeless – that human institutions were unable to reverse their response or cope with truth from beyond their own domain. Jesus had to make some emergency decisions. (In my mythic imagination.)

First, Jesus gave the thief next to Him a one-way ticket to Paradise. Secondly, He sent an urgent message to His Father: “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” Decoded, that meant: “Hold your fire! Cancel wrath. There is more to this than meets the eye.”

A little later, somewhat recovered from His ordeal, Jesus entered God’s presence for a summit conference. “To get right to the point,” He began, “despite your perfect knowledge and wisdom, you have no idea what it *feels* like to be down there! The dimensions are unbearably cramped. People are wonderful, just like you created them. Only *they* don’t know that. They don’t see much of it in each other either. Abba, you cannot imagine the blindness of being caged up in one of those bodies. They cannot see the angels. They cannot even hear the music! They don’t know hardly anything about glory. Their language has no words for even the most commonplace blessings of this realm. They look at the sky, and all that comes is a bittersweet loneliness – an overwhelming sense of incompleteness. And *you* cannot fathom how uptight they feel about survival. Such a monstrous fear is hardly conceivable here. It is painful to be a soul locked up in flesh, with no memory of HOME. My last message was literally true. Despite all our preparation, they had no understanding of what they were doing. They actually thought life would be better without me! Like I was causing their problems. Even the most secure among them cannot really trust love – there is so little experience of it there.” Jesus paused with a shudder, waited to regain control.

“I brought a friend with me, a man they were killing beside me. They had quit on him. Can you believe that? I want you to meet him and see how much soul he has – how much goodness and beauty and potential

he has. They didn't have an inkling of it, or any idea how to bring it forth. It is the same everywhere. There is nothing wrong with the design. Only, the blindness and the fear and the loneliness are so great. It needs more time. It cannot be completed there. We have to find a way to give their souls more space and more chances to grow. They don't need more threats or pain – they need mercy, grace, forgiveness.”

God was smiling. “Yes, my Son. You have learned all I had hoped – maybe even more. Now you will never make the mistake your brother Lucifer made. He thinks everything can be solved if you just apply more pressure and force and punishment and pain. How is he, by the way?”

“About the same, Sir. I don't think he is catching on yet at all. He actually thought I would come over to his side when I saw how things really were down there.”

When the summit conference had ended, it had been decided that earth would never be able to receive her King *en masse*, or by political, cultural, economic, or even religious establishments. It had to be the slowest, hardest way: *one at a time*. It must be by individual recognition and choice. It made it doubly difficult, since many of the benefits were impossible until the vast majority could see it and claim it together. The blessings and the power were cut way back. But it was better than nothing – and still a great deal more than most were willing to receive.

So the judgment remained *and* the New Kingdom became possible – both, at the same time. Which brings us back to today. That is where we are, regardless of how it has been presented. The truth is that the world rejected its rightful King and, for its lack of obedience, does not enjoy the peace or joy or prosperity of the New Kingdom. And yet, by the mercies of Christ, the WAY is still open ... to each one of us – *one at a time*. We can enter the Kingdom at any moment – any time we are willing to give our own personal allegiance to the King. There is nothing this world can do to prevent it. It is the only thing Lucifer cannot stop. Never try to get Christ into Christmas. That is not the issue. Trying to get *ourselves* into Christmas – *that* is the issue.