

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas

December 9, 2018

Love is something so wonderful, so powerful, so natural and so *necessary* that we think it should just fall out of the sky. It should just happen. Yet if love just happened, Hollywood would be out of business. The course of two people finding each other heart to heart is often a long and torturous business involving doubt and trust, expectations known and unknown, testing and the interpretation of tests. There are a lot of ups and downs, highs and lows, pitfalls and obstacles on the road to love.

Baruch, Isaiah and John the Baptist tell us that getting to God follows a similarly tortured roadway. Like love, what could be more wonderful, more powerful, more natural, more *necessary* than our relationship with our own creator? Yet the list of obstacles littering the highway between ourselves and God resembles the post-apocalyptic set of a *Road Warrior* movie. We habitually make a mess of things, even things that should be so natural. So, both prophets of Old and New Testaments testify in today's scripture that it is absolutely imperative that we get to work filling in the valleys and leveling the mountains that barricade the highway leading to God.

Nobody understands God like a five-year-old. Nobody understands how natural and necessary God is like a five year old. When I used to do children's chapel, I would tell the kids that we light the candles to show how God makes us feel warm inside and bright outside, they got it. When I told them how each Bible story shows how much God loves us, they got it.

Something changes when we grow up. Children who understand completely how important God is, and how much they and God love each other, nevertheless reach a point in their lives when it's not so easy. I suppose it's like the children who understand love and who can't understand why mommy and daddy can't just love each other instead of fighting. Yet they reach a point in their lives when they get why mom and dad fight because they have found out for themselves just how risky it is to love.

For me, as for most of us, I would wager that point came around puberty. It was the same transition so forcefully communicated in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve realized that nakedness meant something that had never dawned on them before and started to interpose protective obstacles between themselves and the ones they hope to love, and began to hide, like Adam and Eve, from God as from each other. Suddenly, neither love nor God was nearly so necessary as caution and safety.

What we discover leaving the Garden of childhood is that the world from which mommy and daddy protected us really is big and dangerous, and that there is nobody to protect us from it any more. In the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, nobody is coming to save us. We alone are responsible for ourselves. Yet so often we enter into adulthood still looking for love and still looking for approval with a childlike intensity. Our search for replacements for mommy and daddy piles heaps of baggage onto those who would be our lovers and those who would be our judges, right up to, and including, God.

Here are the highs and lows, the mountains and valleys that block our relationship with God. When we feel unloved by the world, as we inevitably do since the world does not love us, we feel unloved by God. Like lovers, we bargain with God, we test God, we have expectations of God. Deep down, we need for God to be the perfect lover that no human lover could be, and since God is God of all, we interpret the major events in our lives as evidence for or against God's love for us.

That's a pretty tough love relationship, wouldn't you say? That's creating an awful lot of obstacles – mountains and valleys – on the road that connects us to our divine lover. I'm not sure that even God is up to meeting our needs and expectations.

Just as our need for love, the same is true of our need for approval where we experience God as our judge rather than our lover. We have a deep down terror of being found wanting in this life, and for good reason. The world is hard on incompetence. But when we feel judged and found wanting by the world as we inevitably will, we can easily experience God as the terribly harsh judge standing behind the sentence the world has passed on us. For some people, the judgment of God is so overwhelming that it is experienced as judgment for all of eternity, judgment not only on this life but on any possible life in any conceivable future hereafter.

That's a pretty tough relationship, wouldn't you say? Who would want to work for a boss like that? Have a father like that? Go to a priest like that? I truly do not believe, however, that God hates us that much, and I do not believe that God accepts the judgments we or the world pass on ourselves in his name.

Baruch, Isaiah and John the Baptist view these mountains and valleys separating us from God as critical and tell us that it's a matter of primary importance that we fill in the valleys and level the mountains. They are the messengers sent by God before the coming of the Son of God in the flesh, and this is their message. Level the highway. Make the way straight.

But how? Let me make a few humble suggestions – humble because the road separating me from God is strewn with wreckage as much as anybody's.

We could start by recognizing that the valleys and mountains are of our own making. God does not choose to separate himself from us. Neither does the world itself separate us from God. We do that all by our selves.

We do that because we are not fair to God. Deep down, part of all of us hasn't really grown up. We want God to provide the perfect love and security that mommy and daddy once provided in our childhood. The world of childhood's Garden of Eden is our standard for perfection and we expect that of God. But that's not fair. We're not children any more. The world is an adult world and not even God can make it a childlike place for us again, nor would God if he could.

When that is our expectation, then some of us will despise and reject God for failing us; others will impose condition upon condition on our relationship with God to such a degree that we no longer engage with God; others will idealize God to such a degree that we're no longer in touch with the real God but only with our fantasy of him; and still others will take it all upon themselves and feel worthless, loveless, judged and rejected.

If scripture is any guide, none of these outcomes is remotely what God wants for us in this life. Not even the Son of God expects God the Father to give him a free pass and turn life back into childhood's Garden. When Jesus went to the cross, he was telling us, "Look at how *God* does it." God is born into the world just as we are. God accepts the pain life deals out, up to and including judgment and death at the hands of material powers greater than his. Jesus does not reject God for that failure, or tell God "I'll love you if...," or decide that he's a failure at being the messiah. Jesus loves God faithfully, like a grown up. Like an adult. Come what may.

And there you have it. Jesus simply models an adult relationship with God and with people and the world, and invites us to do the same. Think about the many things that Jesus does as an adult. When he is tired and overwhelmed, he doesn't go to God like a child asking God to make it all better; he leaves his personal demons behind and goes to God for inspiration, for direction, for support so that he can stand on his own two feet. With his disciples he is infinitely patient, never expecting more of them than he knows they're able to give. Furthermore, he has faith in his disciples, knowing that they are capable of growth. With great masses of people he loves without condition and without expecting something in return because he knows how much they're overwhelmed by a loveless existence. And his enemies he forgives, because he knows that they just don't know any better. These are all the actions of an adult.

All that said, there have been a lot of ups and downs, ins and outs in this sermon, so in keeping with the paving a straight, level highway, maybe it would be best for me to make everything as simple as possible.

What comes to mind is a scene from the film *Bull Durham* (for my money, the best sports movie ever). A minor league baseball team has struggled through a terrible season, and coach has finally had it. He yells at them for awhile, and then finally says this: "Baseball is a simple game. You throw the ball. You hit the ball. You catch the ball. Just do it!"

Christianity has an equivalent: "Life is a simple game. You love God. You love your neighbor. You love yourself."

Quit making it all so complicated. Quit throwing up obstacles. Quit questioning yourself. Just do it.

Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself.

The Rev. David Hoster