

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
First Sunday in Advent- December 2, 2007

Scripture lessons: Romans 15:5-9 & Matthew 3:1-9

NO LINES THIS CHRISTMAS

Here we are in Advent, the beginning of a new church year, the time to get ready for Christmas. Maybe if you're an alert bargain hunter you already started your Christmas preparing, at least your gift-buying, right after Thanksgiving. But the church waits till Advent for Christmas preparation, and today's the first Sunday of it.

We have our Advent wreath, candles, and banner out. This afternoon we'll hang our greens, put up the full crèche, and set up and decorate our tree. A fine time will be had by all, I trust, as we get ready once more to celebrate Jesus' birth. The Bible wants to insure our good time by giving us John the Baptist again. He's here as usual in Advent, as fierce and odd as ever, wanting to make sure we have a *really* good time.

The beginning of Matthew 3 says, "In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." John lived in the desert. You had to suffer desert heat and dust if you wanted to hear him preach, and when you did, he shouted at you, "Repent. Change your ways because God is near." It was John's way of saying, "Merry Christmas."

Matthew says John wore clothing of "camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist and his food was locusts and wild honey." The camel hair and leather made up his holiday suit and the bugs and honey his holiday feast. Matthew also says, "When (John) saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers.'" It was John's way of saying, "Ho, ho, ho."

John never offers a jolly or light-hearted anticipation of Christmas. He's always strange and intense, and at the surface can even seem like a complete downer. But we always welcome him in Advent because we know he wants to make sure we have a *really* good time when Christmas comes. How is that?

With great expectation, John keeps pointing us to the reality Jesus will bring. It's the glorious vision of Christmas *with no lines*. Not the kind of lines stacked up outside Best Buy the day after Thanksgiving, or the kind of lines most stores hope to have between now and Christmas. It's the truth of a world with no lines . . . between people.

Jesus, John, and Paul lived in a world full of lines separating people into groups of worthy and unworthy, superior and inferior. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg describes 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine as a world with "sharp social boundaries between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, Jew and Gentile." Depending on which side of each line you were on, you were considered in or out, up or down, acceptable or unacceptable in God's eyes.

If anybody in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine was seen, including by themselves, as on the right side of every line, it was the Pharisees and Sadducees. They had the sterling pedigrees and credentials. They had the tip-top reputation, spiritually speaking.

But when they come to hear John preach remember what he does. He picks *them* out of the crowd and calls *them*, "You brood of vipers". He points out the most reputable people in the whole congregation, and says, "You're poisonous snakes."

They're the last ones anyone expects John to pick on, but he goes right after them. He says, "You're nobody special. You think you're the best because Abraham's your ancestor, but get this- God can make children of Abraham out of rocks. You love drawing lines between people with yourselves always on the best side, but get this- your lines mean nothing."

Twenty years later, Paul also sees Jesus' vision of the world with no lines. Before being knocked to his knees on the Damascus road, he's a Pharisee. He draws all sorts of lines through everybody, marking off who's worthy and who's not. Among the worst, he's sure, are the Christians. But once Jesus gets a hold of him his lines go away.

In today's Scripture from his letter to the Romans, Paul says that Jew and Gentile alike are meant to join with one voice in glorifying God. Later, in his letter to the Galatians he writes of how there's no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female since all are one in Christ Jesus. Paul used to love drawing lines, but in Jesus, he gives them up.

We're getting ready to celebrate Jesus' birth again. But let's pretend this morning that we've *never* heard the story before. Let's listen, as if for the first time, to all the lines that it obliterates.

The promised One of God, the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, is born to what woman in what place? His mother's an unwed peasant girl who gives birth in a stable.

This King of Kings and Lord of Lords: where does he sleep? He snoozes in a feed trough.

Who first comes to visit him after hearing from angels that he's the Savior? It's the shepherds, people who in their time and place are seen, along with tax collectors and prostitutes, as among the most impure and disreputable.

Who later comes to visit him from afar? It's the Magi- Gentiles and foreigners for sure, probably astrologers from Iraq or Iran, but, in any case, outsiders with a capital "O".

With Jesus, John, and Paul we can't get around it. We can't get around their conviction that the really good time we're meant to have at Christmas is the high time of a world with no more lines. Yet like the people of their day, we too often split the world into all sorts of "us and them".

On Reign of Christ Sunday last week, Jesus reminded us from the cross not to do that. This week on the first Sunday in Advent he reminds us with his forerunner John and his follower Paul not to do it. But we still do.

We do it in elementary school, middle school, and high school. Think of all the cliques. We keep doing it when we're "adults", too. Think of all the cuts, slights, and put-downs we use to slice and dice the world into who really matters and who doesn't.

God laughs when we do this. God keeps laughing all through God's tears over the false lines we continue to draw. But God keeps working to wipe them out. One of the Bible's best-known verses reminds us of the foundation for this great Christmas truth. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the *world* that he gave his only begotten son . . ."

Not just "for God so loved Christians or Jews or Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists," but "for God so loved the world."

Not just "for God so loved America or Britain or Israel or Palestine or Iraq or Iran or North Korea or Afghanistan," but "for God so loved the world."

Not just "for God so loved the rich, the successful, the strong, and the healthy", but "for God so loved the world."

Not just "for God so loved the poor, the downtrodden, the weak, and the sick", but "for God so loved the world."

Not just "for God so loved all the decent, straight, hard-working, and law-abiding people," but "for God so loved the world".

Not just "for God so loved all the cool, hip, popular, and stylish people, but "for God so loved the world."

In Jesus Christ, we see this. In Advent, Christmas, and all through the church year we see in Jesus that God loves the *whole* world. As Christ's church, we see our really good times come in doing the same. We know God's kingdom party comes at last and in full only when our bogus lines finally are all wiped away. That's the *great* time we yearn for as we prepare again for Christmas.

It's the yearning that lives deepest in us. Frequently, it gets covered over, muffled and lost in the insecurities and fears that keep us dividing up and splitting off. But the times come, thank

God, when we find it again. Times come when this true cry of our heart rings out loud and clear so that we come back to God and to what God and we really want.

Preacher Fred Craddock tells a story of a time like that. He was invited one October to Winnipeg, Canada to lead a weekend conference for some other preachers. He's from the south in our country so he's wary of the weather in places up north. His Canadian host assured him, though, that Winnipeg's October climate is usually very pleasant. There's no need to bring winter clothes, he said. A windbreaker will be just fine.

So Craddock flies up to Winnipeg the day before the conference. He's put up in a downtown hotel and, of course, a huge blizzard blows through that night. The wind, snow, and cold are like nothing he's ever seen.

The next morning, his host calls full of apologies. "This never happens in October," he insists. Yet it has now and the roads are so bad the conference has to be canceled. Nobody can even get downtown to pick Craddock up and take him somewhere else.

And there's no restaurant in his hotel. Everything downtown, in fact, is closed because of the blizzard except for the bus station. Thankfully, the bus station has a café that never closes.

So Craddock gets directions to it. "It's three or four blocks down and a block over," his host tells him. "But be sure to dress warm because it's *bitter* cold out there." It's the same man who first told him he'd only need a windbreaker.

Craddock zips up his jacket as tight as he can. Four long blocks down and one over he stumbles into the bus station, frozen to the bone. He finds the café. It's a sorry excuse for one, but it's crowded with people who've fled the cold, all of them come together in the warm.

Craddock eventually finds an open seat. He sits and waits for a long time before the waiter comes to him. He asks for a menu, but learns there's only soup available. He orders it, but when it comes it looks so *bad*. Everyone else is eating it, but to Craddock it looks just like dirty dishwasher- gray but warm.

As he debates whether to eat it or not, another person stumbles in out of the blizzard- a bedraggled woman poorly dressed and half-frozen. She finds a seat and the waiter comes to her. She asks for a glass of water, he brings it, and then asks for the rest of her order.

She says, "Only the water, thanks." He tells her, "Look, lady, I've got paying customers in here. What do you think this is- a church? You have to order." She says, "I have no money. I just want the water and some time to get warm." The waiter will have none of it. He says loudly, "You have to leave. You don't order- you leave."

The woman silently stands up, wraps herself in her coat, and heads for the door. Suddenly, everyone else in the café stands up and starts to leave, too. Craddock's amazed but joins in.

The waiter repents and calls out "Alright, alright, alright- she can stay." Everybody sits back down, and the waiter brings the woman soup for free.

Craddock asks the person next to him, a café regular, "Who is that woman? Is she someone special?" He says, "I've never seen her before."

Craddock decides now that he has to try the soup everyone else is eating. It still looks like dirty dishwasher to him, but he sips it and is very surprised. He keeps sipping and thinks to himself, "Well, I'll be doggone. It tastes just like . . . just like . . . bread and wine."

He'd learned that from Jesus, and so have we. Getting ready for Christmas, we wipe away every phony line between who's in or out, who's worthy or unworthy, who's acceptable or unacceptable. We all join together, as one, at Jesus' table. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff