

PREPARING FOR A JOURNEY

Luke 2:3b-6
Rev. Mary Scifres

First Sunday of Advent
Community Church, Congregational of Corona del Mar

Henry and Sue seemed embarrassed when they came to visit me in the church office, where I served as their youth minister. Henry seemed almost downtrodden, which surprised me, because usually Henry came to see me to plan a youth spaghetti fundraiser; he loved cooking for the crowds. But Henry was there with embarrassing news that his 16-year-old daughter Kim was pregnant, with a boyfriend she hardly even liked. They wanted to come see me as a family, but Kim had asked her parents to come and prepare me first. Henry and his family were unique in our wealthy suburban church. Henry worked as a mechanic in the local car shop, and he and Sue hardly had two extra dollars to scrape together. What extra they had, they had shared with their dozens of foster children over the years. But Kim was theirs. They'd given birth to her late in life; she was their surprise joy. There they were, this 60-something couple, now with their 16-year-old daughter and her own unexpected pregnancy, and not such a surprise joy. They visited with me many times over the coming weeks, along with our senior pastor, who had his own wisdom to give, since he also was the father of a 16-year-old daughter. Eventually, Kim decided she wanted to both birth and keep this baby. That afternoon of decision-making, Kim said, "I guess I'd better get ready to give birth." And her dad looked at her and wisely said, "You'd better get ready to raise a child; it's a journey, not a destination, honey."

Christmas is a little bit like Kim's pregnancy. Christmas is a little bit like raising a child, because Christmas is more of a journey than a destination. It's about welcoming the Christ child back into your life, and it's about making Jesus real in our lives. And that's not a *destination* we reach on December 25. It's a *journey we celebrate* on December 25. Because welcoming the Christ child is something we have to do again and again. Even my friends who've had dramatic

conversion experiences of finding Christ still have to be on a journey to be in constant relationship with Christ. And for those of us who haven't had a dramatic conversion, it's clearly a journey. I don't expect to ever get to that specific destination of a lightning bolt experience, since I grew up in Christ's love and grew into my acceptance of this gracious gift. And that's okay, because the destination isn't the point; constantly finding ways to welcome the Christ child back into our lives, to make Jesus real with our actions, our thoughts, our words – this is the point. And this is surely a journey, just like raising a child, not a destination.

And so we're given this wonderful season before Christmas called Advent, to celebrate the Advent, the coming of the Christ child. These four weeks before Christmas are to prepare us for the 12-day season of Christmas. But the journey of making Jesus real is an every day journey, not a journey just for the 12 days of Christmas. But in Advent, each year, we get to prepare for the journey again, to focus again on the Christmas challenge to make God so real that God is flesh and blood, to let God be so much a part of our lives that God is a tiny baby who can count on our nourishment and our care, to make God such a central part of our lives that we set aside a holy day, a holy season, to remember and celebrate Christ's love and light and gift-giving. Advent is the season to help us prepare for this Christmas journey, for this Christmas way of life.

“Prepare the way of the Lord,” John the Baptist says to us. Prepare the way of Christ. For centuries, people prayed for the Messiah to come. Other religions around the world still pray for the Messiah to come. Those of us who claim Christ proclaim that the promised Messiah has come. We celebrate that joyous promise fulfilled *every year* on Christmas Day, even as we pray for the Messiah to come again.

But in these weeks leading up to Christmas day, we're invited to prepare the way for the Messiah to come and guide our lives yet again. December is here, and ready or not, there are

only 23 shopping days left until Christmas. Oh, now I'm talking a language you know. Joking aside, many of you know that the weeks ahead are meant to prepare us for Christ, to prepare us for Christmas.

But what does it mean to really prepare for Christmas? There's so much more than just shopping and gift lists. The light of Christmas is so much brighter than just tinsel and garland, ribbons and paper. The celebration of Christmas is so much more than just food and decorations.

There's nothing inherently wrong with the shopping and the gift lists, the tinsel and the garland, the ribbons and paper, the food and decorations. These are all a part of our tradition. Christmas includes giving gifts to people we love. Christmas involves trees and ornaments, twinkling lights and shimmering tinsel. Christmas includes food and festivities for gathering and fellowship with friends and family. But the root of even these traditions is to help us to prepare the way for Christ, to prepare for Christmas, to prepare for a Christmas way of life.

Prepare the way of the Lord. Make Christ's paths straight. And that's our best clue to the month ahead. As we decide which traditions to continue, evaluate each one against that prophetic word of wisdom. Is this helping me to make a straight path to Christmas Day? Is this helping me make smooth the rough ways of journeying with Christ? Is this helping me see the salvation of God.

Gift-giving can be a way to make a straight path to God, *when* the gifts help us show our love, share our generosity, and honor the memory of those wise ones who brought gifts to the baby Jesus. Gift-giving is a reminder, just as Holy Communion is a reminder, of the greatest gift we've ever been given: the gift of unconditional love and grace from God through Christ Jesus. When searching for the perfect gift with love and joy helps us to remember God's gracious love for us, then that gift-giving becomes sacred as it connects with the sacred gift God has shown to

us in the life of Jesus. But if gift-giving and shopping become burdensome and obligatory, frustrating and exhausting, expensive and debt-riddled, the tradition is not helping us to make smooth the Christmas journey. So if the shopping and gift traditions of your life are more burden than gift, find a simpler option or a more loving option to help re-direct the gift tradition to a reminder of Christ's gift. Perhaps work gifts can become donations in honor of co-workers and their favorite charities. A friend who is fighting cancer might really appreciate a ride to their chemo treatments. A returning veteran might prefer a donation to Wounded Warriors. A favorite book can enrich someone else's life and need not be new – it can come from your own bookshelf. If you find too many cookies filling up your kitchen when your love of baking sets in, box those cookies up into gifts for friends who never have time to bake. If you miss holding babies, offer an evening of babysitting to the neighbor who's just given birth... or offer to come hold the baby while Mom takes a nap. So many simple ways to say "I love you," "I care." So many opportunities to reflect the kind of love Christ gives to us, a love filled with generosity and sincerity, a love filled with care and comfort, a love filled with grace and abundance.

Similarly, our traditions of decorating and dressing up can be wonderful ways to celebrate the abundant gift that God gives to us in coming to earth to be with us. Decorating with evergreens and Christmas trees is powerful when it helps us to remember the everlasting love of God. Lighting candles and twinkly lights gives a shining symbol of hope in these shorter, darker days of winter, and when each light reminds us that Christ's light has shone in the darkness, all of the climbing around bushes and gutters may actually seem worthwhile again. But if all of that stumbling, tumbling work only causes grumbling and discontent, let it go. Light one candle at the dinner table or find an Advent wreath and light one purple candle each week as

we move toward Christmas. Let the simple things light your path and make smooth the rough road on the Christmas journey.

What about all this food and the crazy list of festivities in this season? It can seem a bit much to revel in all that abundance when so many in the world and even in our community go without. And indeed, if these traditions become times for gluttony or selfishness, they will only detour our Christmas journey. But even Jesus feasted with his disciples on the eve of his death, disciples who would hardly have imagined this was truly their Last Supper with their beloved Master, Teacher and Friend. At the table of Holy Communion, we are reminded that feasting is an opportunity to celebrate the joy of God's gifts of grace and love. And so, when our holiday feasts and festivities become ways of celebrating our faith and rejoicing in God's abundant gifts in our lives, the feasts and festivities can become yet another way of breaking bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Christ. When our parties and gatherings are opportunities to re-connect with people we love and share our joy of that love and that connection, the parties and gatherings become a time of fellowship that honors the agape love Christ calls us to have for one another. Such traditions in honor of Christ's birth can strengthen us for the Christmas journey.

As we enter into this time of Advent, my prayer is that the coming month can bring us many opportunities to prepare for the Christmas journey. But if your paths become crooked, when our traditions move into burdens, or when our road to Christmas seems to meet only roadblocks and detours, we have this assurance from God: "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth." Even if we fail in our preparations, God's grace will be all-sufficient to overcome our twisting, turning paths... and we shall all see the salvation of God. That is the

promise of Christ. That is the promise of the Christmas journey. On the journey we have a helper.

Just like Kim had helpers on her journey. Her church, who threw her a baby shower, her youth group who became her favorite babysitters, and her parents who housed her and helped raise her baby boy for his first four years. Kim's journey toward motherhood was a bit like the journey toward living Christmas. Her child's birth was just the beginning, an important beginning just as Christmas day is an important day, but only the start. She spent those first four years finishing her GED and getting a community college degree so she could support her young son, moving out on her own before he went on to Kindergarten. By then, she knew she was on a lifelong journey, a journey that had brought a wonderful young boy into the world who would change her life for the better forever, a child she journeys with these many years later. So, it is with us and the Christ child--an unexpected arrival, entering in perhaps the most inconvenient of times, but bringing us an opportunity to change our lives for the better forever. That's the promise of Christmas, and that's the journey we celebrate when we walk with Jesus all the days of our lives.