

## “Again and again”

December 6, 2009

Text: *Luke 3:1-6, Philippians 1:3-11*

### I.

A voice cries out in the wilderness:

*Prepare the way of the Lord, Make his paths straight.  
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;  
and all flesh shall see God's salvation.*

What do those words remind us of?

Right away, these words from Second Isaiah remind us of **John the Baptist** and Advent, don't we? These are the words that draw in to Christmas. They remind us of the Christmas story. Where would we be without these words—words which we repeat, *again and again*, year after year?

Without **John the Baptist** shouting out in the wilderness, it wouldn't seem like Christmas, would it?

The point is: there are stories in our lives, traditions in our life-experience, that need retelling. And to leave them out ... to not retell them ... diminishes us all.

When we hear again of John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, we're reminded that Jesus is born into a real world of human frailty and deprivation. He's born into a world of sin, where there are all kinds of problems—people without work (unemployed or underemployed), struggling to pay their bills ... people without adequate health care, education and opportunity.

The Incarnation doesn't happen in a vacuum of human meaning and struggle. And we retell the story to remind us ... to get us into the spiritual and mental framework so the meaning of Christmas can come alive for us once again.

The re-telling of the story is important—again and again.

### II.

Christmas is about special times with family and friends, to be sure. But there's a context. And the context is the Christmas story. Our gatherings at Christmas are an affirmation and celebration of our deep love and affection for one another ... the same

love that God has for us.

*Again and again* is how often we tell and retell the Christmas story because *again and again* is how often we need to be reminded of God's love.

*Again and again* is how often we tell our children we love them because we can never tell them too often or too much.

*Again and again* is how often we turn to God in humble prayer, seeking God's presence, earnestly trying to bend our ways towards God's ways because—always—we need more of God.

*Again and again* is the motto that people of faith live by. It's a motto of hope, of persistence and determination. *Again and again* captures the spirit of people who believe, people of faith who refuse to give in to inertia or boredom or discouragement or the latest bad news.

There's a certain security in the *again and again*. It's the security of tradition. Tradition is important—the tradition of our families, our faith communities, our culture, our nation. In these traditions, our life stories come alive with depths of meaning and joy.

At Christmas, we need both the Christmas story and the coming together of family and friends. We don't *just* come together; we come together around a particular story with particular meaning. Our coming together and the Christmas story work together, feeding off of each other.

### III.

Last Christmas, Yvette and I celebrated our usual Christmas Eve services here at the church with most of you. Then, on Christmas morning, we drove to Orlando where we met our younger daughter, Erica, and her husband, Cliff, and then we all flew to Panama where we eventually met older daughter, Natasha, and her husband, Lawrence. This was all on Christmas day. We were going to have Christmas in Panama.

The problem was, we never actually celebrated Christmas. We were traveling, eventually meeting up at my brother-in-law's beach-front condo outside Panama City. Again, everything was great, except we never HAD Christmas ... where there's the special gathering around the Christmas story and the Christmas experience.

For that, you need special music and the manger scene and special decorations and food preparations and all the elements that recall for us the special season of the year and the special love that rose up from a bed of straw in a Bethlehem manger.

For me, it was like we skipped something.

It was like tucking your child in at night but forgetting to tell them you love them. Or, having a birthday celebration but forgetting to sing Happy Birthday. Something was missing.

There's a place in our lives for the *again and again* of our traditions.

#### IV.

As I was working on the message for this morning, I was thinking how meaningful it would be, sometime, to get together—all of us ... everyone's invited—and share our traditions of Christmas.

No doubt, we all have our stories to tell. I'm always curious how our traditions are born and how they evolve over the years.

- The different ways we use the Christmas story ...
- The manger scene ...
- The music of Christmas ...
- The food preparations ...
- Special decorations ...
- Special gatherings ...
- Traditions of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day ...

Let's just take a few minutes this morning and recall, informally, the most meaningful parts of Christmas for us and our families. (At this point, seven or eight members of the congregation share, spontaneously, some of their special Christmas celebrations and traditions.)

#### V.

What all of this points to is that our traditions, as they are shaped and as they evolve over the years, have a context.

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius,  
when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,  
and Herod was ruler of Galilee,  
and his brother Philip ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis,  
and Lysanias ruler of Abilene ...  
during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas ...*

That was the wider context: And then ... *the word of God came to JOHN son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* And the Christmas story unfolds.

As Philippians reminds us, there are things about our lives, about our faith, that we want to remember, *again and again*.

When Paul wrote Philippians, he was in prison, most likely at Ephesus. Imagine, being in prison during the formative years of the early Church. Certainly, in prison, Paul had his moments of loneliness and sadness—away from his faith community, those who were helping him build up the early church.

And then there was the day-to-day uncertainty of prison life. And so, there in prison, as he's writing to the Philippians, he remembers ...

1. the many kindnesses of the Philippians towards him ...
2. all the special interactions with the Philippians and the memories that build up ...
3. *Again and again*, he remembers ... and the memories are reassuring.

At this time of year, one of the most important things for us who are parents and grandparents is that our children and grandchildren learn their stories—the stories we pass on to them ... and how their lives are intertwined with the story, all of which helps them remember, *again and again*, who they are.

This is how the story of our faith stays alive; and it makes all the difference.

And when we hear once again, *The voice of one crying out in the wilderness*, we know what it means ... and what it points to ... *and all flesh shall see God's salvation*.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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