

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Third Sunday of Advent

16 December 2018

“Waiting for Now”

Third in a sermon series entitled “The Waiting Room”

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 12:1-6

Christian Scripture: Luke 3:7-18



On the day I graduated from high school, I dreaded my father’s reprimand and condemnation.



You see, after having just returned home from the graduation ceremony, after the obligatory picture-taking and throwing-off my cap and gown, I put on new clothes and rushed to my car to drive to the all-night party held at the local racquetball and health club.



I hopped in my car, a 1972 Ford Gran Torino, you know 351 Windsor, the Starsky and Hutch cop car (but mine had four doors, wide rims, dual exhaust, and air shocks that acted as lift-kit). In the garage, I threw it in reverse, spun the tires, tore out, and cut the wheel hard to make the two point turn. While still waiting for the front of the car to spin around, I got ready to throw it in forward drive to tear-out of the driveway. But, at the end of the reverse spin, I heard a terrific explosion and shattering of glass as my car came to an abrupt halt. I put my head down and I instantly remembered by father's brand new Buick, purchased just last week, was parked at the end of the first turn of my two point turn. You see, my parents were divorced, my father did not live with me. I did the same manoeuvre in the same place a hundred times before and his car was only present then on the special occasion of my graduation.



I contemplated what I had done for a minute or two and slowly exited my car. By now, a small gathering of family and friends gathered to gawk in astonishment. I walked to the rear of my car and to my amazement my father's car was still rocking back-and-forth a little from the impact! I had basically drilled the right rear side of his car into the left side and blew-out three of the six windows. There was a little relief in that my car suffered no damage (as I was after all driving a converted Sherman tank and I ploughed into my father's car with my corner bumper, seemingly made of concrete).

I thought, 'my night is over'. My graduation celebration was destroyed. My night was finished. I would not see my friends, on this night of all nights, to celebrate. I cried and apologized. I said I was stupid. I felt like crawling under a rock and dying. I deserved all the condemnation in the world heaped upon me. Of all the nights to make this mistake, why this one? I thought about making some phone call to friends and saying my night was over. I waited for the admonitions, the anger, the cursing, the punishment, and the itemization of the repair costs. I waited to hear of how this accident would cloud my entire

summer. I sat there and waited. And I am still waiting to be condemned.



As I helped Duck-Tape cardboard to the large spaces where the windows used to be, by father calmly, and lovingly told me that I must still go to the party, but I must be more careful and to drive safe. He told me ‘I only graduate from high school once’. As he struggled to pull-back the rear quarter panel from the wheel-well, he told me he would have no problem slowly driving his newly ventilated Buick back to Maryland, about three hours away. As I cautiously drove away to see my friends, I looked back in the rear view mirror to see my father continue to tape cardboard to his non-existent windows.

Friends, have you experienced grace like that? Have you ever experienced forgiveness without an agenda? Have you ever experienced mercy, with no cost? Have you ever been loved without at all deserving it? Have you ever been blessed when you should have been cursed?

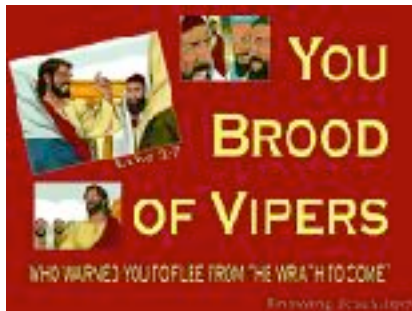


In a very small, but very profound way, for me that night, as John the Baptist quoted the prophet Isaiah, 'the ravine had been filled-in, the mountain levelled, the corner was straightened and the rugged way was made smooth' (Luke 3:5). I remember had the most fun graduation party. I told everyone what had happened. I proclaimed the grace I received. My friends were stunned and flabbergasted that my father forgave and released me without a word of condemnation.



Friends, I hope we can take away two Advent lessons from my true story. The first is that repentance is the key to fully experience the love and the great joy of a relationship with God. The second is that we *all*, and I mean, we are *all*, are welcome to this great joy through Jesus Christ.

You may ask, Scott, ‘How can we all experience this great joy, this experience in which all is made right in the world, where it feels as if there are no turns, no inclines and no obstacles in life?’



Does not John the Baptist speak to those he is about to baptize and call them ‘vipers’ (Luke 3:7); doesn’t he threaten them with retribution; doesn’t he speak of burning the chaff in the fire (Luke 3:17)? Well, yes, he does. Yet, he does in fact baptize them, doesn’t he? He does bring them to a place of being forgiven, of being cleaned, of being purified and of being placed in right relationship with God, restored. *It never ended with the warnings and threats.* In fact, the story begins *and* ends with God’s favour.



In fact, John the Baptist quotes Isaiah, where the prophets stated not that some are going to heaven and some are going to hell, but rather that “*All* humankind [all ‘flesh’] shall see God’s deliverance” (Luke 3:6).



John the Baptist told the ones who have too many clothes to give to those who have too little. He told the ones with too much food to give some the ones who have too little. John told the collaborators with the Romans to not extort. He told Roman soldiers (are you kidding me?! Roman soldiers?!), the ones that his ministry wished to see overthrown by the Messiah, to no longer bully, blackmail and steal. It is these people, the worst of the worst, that John baptised into relationship with God. So, despite all the references about the terrible Day of Judgment, I believe it is John, Jesus, and God’s intention that after all have been brought into relationship with God, that there will be no one left to judge!

So, why does John mention vipers and the coming retribution? Why mention the axe being employed against roots and trees that fail to produce fruit? To be honest, I don't know all the answers, but, I know how horrible I felt when I hit my father's car. That night, I repented, and I repented deeply through my tears. I knew I deserved to miss the graduation party. I deserved to work all summer to pay the debt owed to my father. I even deserved curses and 'I told you sos'. And it is because I felt so deeply about my guilt, I felt an equally greater and more powerful sense of forgiveness and blessing from my father.



And it is 'salvation', but much more powerfully, that John intended for those who care not for others in need and for those who abuse and oppress others. Despite the threats from John, John communicated that it is God's will that all humankind [flesh] shall see God's deliverance (salvation) (II Peter 3:9).



