

Sunday, December 13, 2015: A Spacious Christmas: A Story for Others

Luke 3:7-18

Pastor Jenny Smith

Marysville UMC

My 15 month old son is starting to work on a specific life skill: fake crying. We see him testing this out once in awhile. I can almost see him thinking, "Hmm...I'm a little hungry, so I wonder if I start crying, will Mom pick me up. Oh, she did, yes! It works." Now yes, we feed our son well and don't ignore his serious cries...but I am starting to see a difference. He's learning to fake it. To get what he wants without putting in much effort.

Have you ever been accused of faking something? Since we're in the season of Advent, let me put it this way. **Is anyone faking their way through the holidays?** If you're honest, you'd rather skip this month and be in January tomorrow. There's too much baggage, pain, grief and depression this time of year. If that's you, reach out to someone you trust. Share what you're going through. Pour your heart out to God. Don't walk through this month alone.

When it comes to how our faith affects our actions, there have been times I've faked it. I've pretended. I've prayed when I don't feel like praying. I've given something away when I really wanted to keep it. I've put myself first. A lot, in fact. Being a human and a disciple of Jesus isn't easy.

John the Baptist has harsh words for those who are trying to fake it.

John the Baptist warns the crowd that their family lineage doesn't guarantee their salvation. How they live their lives matters. They respond by running to get baptized by John, while asking what they need to do for salvation. John responds to the crowd, the tax collector and the soldier with a call for an end to a lifestyle based on greed and the accumulation of material possessions. John invites people, "when you have two shirts, give one away." Traditionally, repentance was expressed by putting on sackcloth or ashes, but for John, repentance takes the form of radical love for one's neighbor. There's a difference there. For John, the first step in a redeemed community is for those who have, to share with those who have not.

If the Jesus story makes a difference in my life, then it must become a story to others. We are not allowed to keep this story to ourselves.

How much of your Advent is focused on yourself vs others? In the past, once I got my gifts for others, most of my shopping turned towards myself. There were some good deals this time of year! I justified that it was things I would need in the next 12 months anyways. That's okay. But I was missing the bigger point of Advent. As I pause and clear away some clutter, as I invite God deeper into my heart and life, the next natural step is turning my attention to the other (neighbor, stranger, family). **I've been guilty of keeping the beautiful story of Jesus to myself.** For reasons I try to convince myself are okay. "I don't want people to think I'm one of 'those Christians.'" "I want to be in relationship with them for a long time before I mention why I am the way I am."

When I prioritize my own spiritual growth and discipleship, then God makes room for me to wonder what others are going through.

Yes, it's hard to share our faith sometimes. We're not sure how. We don't know what to say. We don't want to offend anybody. If you've ever thought those things, then I've got something for you to try. **Just love people.** Don't worry about why or what you do. There's no formula. Just love the people closest to you first. Mostly it's about showing up, paying attention and cooperating with what God is already going. Remember?

You don't bring the magic. **God is already at work in the lives of everyone you meet.** You get to be the noticer - the reminder - you get to see it and name it for what it is...the grace of God. The pressure is off. You're not saving anyone. God is.

Our youth have caught a vision that Christmas is a story meant to be passed onto others.

Let's watch this video and then I'll share a little bit about malaria.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaQDTdAR-qc>

Malaria is a parasite found naturally in mosquitoes.

- It is primarily in the Tropics and Subtropics
- Prevalent in poor areas due to the lack of infrastructure and poor sanitation
- Causes fever, headaches, coma and death
- Primarily spread at night
- Pregnant women and CHILDREN UNDER 5 are most susceptible
- 780M people are at risk; about 219M cases of malaria in 2010 and an estimated 660,000 deaths.
- Africa is the most affected continent: about 90% of all malaria deaths occur there.
- **It is preventable and treatable**
- Been around for thousands of years
- Was leading killer during WWII
- Epidemic in the SE United States
- The Center for Disease Control (CDC) was founded in 1946 primarily to eradicate malaria in the US. Completed in 1951. *We know how to get rid of malaria.*

- **Organizations:** 11 million United Methodist Church members, United Nations World Health Organizations, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to name a few (we were invited to participate because of our very sound relief system - UMCOR)
- **Churches:** unprecedented cooperation among Christian, Muslim, and traditional African religious leaders
- **Methods:** nets, education, research, community empowerment
 - The United Methodist Church partnered with Nothing but Nets several years back and brought great awareness to the epidemic of malaria in Africa. While amazing work was done, Nothing But Nets was just that... nothing but nets. But now we are fighting this disease with nets, treatment, education, communication and advocacy.

The goal was \$75 million over 3 years and we're very excited to share we're at \$68 million! 90% of our goal and they're hoping to wrap it up in 2016.

The best news of all comes from Julia Frisbie, our Imagine No Malaria coordinator, this week. "Malaria deaths in Africa have fallen by 70% since 2000. A child used to die every 30 seconds from this preventable disease. Then it was down to one a minute. As of this week, it's one death every two minutes. That's still too many, but we are making improvement."

And we get to be a part of it. Sometimes it's tempting for a church to keep their Christmas Eve offering (usually higher than usual with our guests) for our internal purposes. But let's step out in big faith this year and invite everyone to give 100% of our gifts to Imagine No Malaria. Let's see what God can do with the gifts we bring.

Imagine No Malaria is preparing the way for the kingdom of God among us.

John the Baptist's primary role was to prepare the way for Jesus. To get things ready. This is the work of Advent.

We each prepare the way for Jesus.

As parents, we're preparing the way for Jesus to work in the hearts of our kids.

As friends, our hugs, encouragement and forgiveness prepare the way for Jesus to connect with someone

As adult children, our love and care for our parents prepares the way for Jesus to keep teaching them what it means to age with grace and wisdom, even when it's hard

As a good steward of creation, we prepare the way for Jesus' arrival in our world, not just to humans, but to all of creation.

The little things we do to make space for God in our own lives prepares the way for Jesus to come anew for us.

There's someone in your life who needs to be sitting in this room on Christmas Eve. The deepest part of their heart needs to hear the Jesus story in a new way. Freedom, new life and a whole new way of seeing the world is waiting for them. You've been preparing the way for them to connect with Jesus. Invite them to come with you.

And someone is preparing the way of Jesus for you.

Every Monday night lately, my little brother calls me on FaceTime and we pull out our Bibles and talk about the book of Mark. We read a section to each other, ask questions, wonder aloud and name where we feel God calling us next. My brother is preparing the way for me to receive Jesus in a new way.

In my many interactions with you as a church, I receive pure love and grace. You are preparing the way for me to receive Jesus in a new way. Thank you.

Someone is preparing the way of Jesus for you. Let down your guard. Tear down the wall that you've built to keep people out, for Christmas is a story for others and **for you**. Prepare to welcome Jesus this Christmas. Our work of Advent together continues. Amen.