

Alan Baughcum

SERMON: “The Presentation of the Lord”

Second Congregational Church

Newcastle, MA

February 2, 2020

Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 2:22-40

Prayer: May these words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

On Thursday mornings you can find me in Bath doing the exercises that my long-suffering personal trainer directs me to do. (You should pray for her! Really!!)

She often stops me and makes me start over because I am not doing the exercise properly. My form is all wrong, she says. Tighten your core! Get your head up! Line up your shoulder blades! And that is just when I am walking through the door!!

I do try to get it right, but, again, I say, pray for her ... putting up with me is not easy!

Joseph and Mary were getting the form right when they went to the Temple in Jerusalem. They were required to go there for Mary’s purification, required for all women who had just given birth. They were also required to go there to redeem the first-born son. Both required a gift, a sacrifice, in this case a pair of turtledoves or young pigeons.

In the Temple there were two people waiting for them and waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Both Simeon, a righteous man, and Anna, a prophet, seems to have recognized who the child Jesus was, i.e., the long-awaited Messiah. Although there was more than one view among Jewish believers as to exactly what the Messiah would do and accomplish, there was a form, an expectation.

Our situation here in Maine is very different. There is no form, no expectation, into which Jesus fits. I discovered that, as a settled pastor in Maine, people would come to weddings and funerals without having a clue about what to do, where to stand, or what was going to happen. I had to spend a few minutes explaining the process and procedures because there were just so many folks who did not know what happens in a church or what to do in a church. That is no accident ... by some measures Maine is the least religious state of any state in the U.S.

We are “strangers in a strange land.” We are Christians in a place where many, perhaps most, people see no need for Christianity in particular or religion in general.

How do we as Christians share the good news among people who are not looking for such good news and have no category into which to fit it? It is hard enough to explain what the United Church of Christ is when no one in Maine knows one denomination from another ... when they do not even know who Jesus is, or who we claim him to be. There is no form or format for faith, no expectation of a Messiah or even of good news.

Joseph and Mary presented Jesus in a place and in a religious context that had forms and expectations. Jesus ministered in a time and place where people understood, sort of, what he was trying to do and say. We live in a place and among a people who are unaware and uninterested in what we want to share, perhaps even see our beliefs and behavior as alien.

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I have spent a fair amount of time pondering this problem. When I get up and try to preach the good news, how do I do that in a way that will be understood? In a way that may attract some interest? How can I answer the question that asks, “Why should I care about Jesus, your good news, or even your God? Why do I need to bother with any of that?”

That is not just my problem as a preacher ... all Christians are commanded to proclaim the good news, to share their faith in some way with others. (Mt 10:7, Mk 16:15) After all, what is the point of having good news and not sharing it?

I am going to be working on this issue for some time to come. I invite your ideas and your conversation. Pretty sure I am going to need a lot of help on this!

Here is what I have come up with so far in my thinking. Remember in Genesis that everything created by God was found it to be good, and very good? It is all there ... look it up.

But there was one thing that God found that was not good ... Gen 2:18 ... “Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”

None of the animals or birds or cattle turned out to be the right choice as a partner. God then created another human to be Adam’s partner. God made us for relationship, and God created us to be in right relationship with one another, including partnering with each other. God made us to help one another because we need help. We are not fully human, fully alive, unless we do help one another.

Not only did God create us for relationship, our God wants to be our help. God has proven to be our help in the past and wants to be our help now and into the future.

Whenever you hear a preacher quoting the Bible, you ought to wonder if she is using one particular verse to make the point, regardless of whether the verse actually says that or not or is a verse that is not consistent with the rest of the Bible. It is called proof-texting and I do not think I am doing that. I did a Google search and found more than 120 verses in the OT and NT that talk about how God hears our cries and helps, how we need God’s help, how God’s people have experienced God’s help, and how God stands ready even now to offer God’s help. (There are also 86 verses akin to that in the books in-between the OT and NT.)

So, how is it that we are supposed to live and share our faith in a way that might be intriguing and interesting and attractive? In a place with no established forms or expectations that we can tap into.

I suppose we could start telling people that they need help. It would be true ... Biblically true! But it might come across as just a little off-putting. And, hearing it from someone like me with a, well, somewhat non-Maine accent at that! “Y’all need help! Y’all need Jesus!” Mmm ... don’t think so!

Another approach is one I grew up with in my Georgia fundamentalist church. There, young people (and the unsaved of every age) were told they needed help to avoid the horrors of spending an eternity in a fire and brimstone hell. The objective was to scare people into being saved, baptized, and thence into the church.

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That approach is still employed, in Maine as well as down south. I visit local religious institutions as part of being an officer of the Brunswick Area Interfaith Council and I can tell you that I have heard such sermons within a mile of my home in Brunswick.

The problem with scaring people into the church is that it is, in my opinion, unbiblical. As a practical matter, it is also counterproductive. The most common reason that people give for not going to church or affiliating with a religion is that they do not like the angry, judgmental god preached in a lot of churches.

Let me propose an alternative.

Brace yourself, I am going to quote from the Bible again. Hebrews 12:1-2 ... Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Let me recommend that we approach the life God has given us and our neighbors with joy ... if Jesus could do it, why not us?

By the way, the word “joy” appears more than 250 times in the Bible. It is a good Biblical word. The Psalmist says, “Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth.” (Ps 66:1) When the angel spoke to the shepherds keeping watch on Christmas Eve, “... I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” Lk 2:10 Jesus to his followers, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Jn 15:11 Paul to the Galatians, “... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness ...” Gal 5:22

Living joyfully in our faith is authentic ... and, I submit, a non-threatening, better yet, a welcoming way of letting people know who we are and what we do when we gather. But, of course, in our current public environment in this country, it is a little hard to be joyful, isn't it? Don't care if you are a Republocrat or a Demopublican, nobody seems to be very joyful.

How do we get the joy back? We can take steps to do that ... each of us individually and all of us collectively. For example, when I am down in the dumps and walking around with a frown on my face, I sometimes wonder why everyone I pass or meet seems so gloomy. And then I remember to smile ... smiling at someone is amazing ... other people smile back!! Just as we can communicate gloom, so also can we communicate happiness, even joy. Smile!

Don't stop at smiling ... start a conversation ... ask the other person how they are doing and signal with attentiveness in eye contact and body language that we really want to hear what they have to say. We can listen and ask ourselves what kinds of gifts are present in ourselves and in the other person than can be of service to one another, to the community, to the church ... offer to help: “Brother, can I help you stack that firewood? Sister, can I relieve you of some chore that is weighing you down right now? Can I help with a loving and listening ear?”

And when we part from the other person, remember them in our prayers to God ... prayers of thanksgiving and concern and a desire for their well-being.

When the exiled people from Jerusalem found themselves to be strangers in exile in the strange land of Babylon nearly 3000 years ago, the prophet Jeremiah answered their question of “How do we worship God in this place?” by advising them to work for community where they were. Jeremiah wrote to the

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exiles, “Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the G-d of Israel, unto all the exiles whom I have exiled from Jerusalem unto Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; and plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and have sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply, and do not diminish. And seek the peace of the city in which I caused you to be exiled, and pray unto God for it; for in its peace you shall have peace... (Jer 29:4-7)” Keep the faith and seek the peace of the city ... participate in the community and civic life of the place we reside, and the place we love, for surely Maine is a beautiful and wonderful place to be.

We can help collectively, as well as individually, to build community. We are often over-fixated, in my opinion, on what’s going on in government, at various levels. We also act collectively in our families, our civic organizations, fraternal and sisterly associations, businesses, social action organizations, etc. ... not to mention churches. In each of those venues we ought to think about ways that we can collectively be welcoming, upbeat, inclusive, and open ... both to our local neighbors and throughout the world.

But still, right now especially, there is government ... well, I would encourage each of us to act intentionally, lovingly, openly, honestly and work to improve our discourse, to support candidates and policies that will benefit the people of this and future generations, and to advocate for all sorts of processes, policies, and programs that will build and rebuild our community. No matter our political party, we each have reason for disappointment right now. The Psalmist warned, Psalm 146:2-4, “I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. Do not put your trust in princes (I would add “princesses”), in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.” And to that, I say “Amen!”

We can be disappointed, but we should not despair. Jeremiah closed his letter to the people in exile with these words, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore [you] ...” (Jer 29:11-14a) Seek the Lord with all our hearts and minds and souls (Amos 9:12, Acts 15:17). Again, I say, “Amen!”

I know that what happens in our governments sometimes feels like the end of the world. But remember, only God is ultimate, not government officials and their actions ... and God is in charge of how things are going to turn out. That does not take away pain and suffering in the moment, but it gives us hope that, in MLKJr.’s words, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

And we desperately need to display in our faith lives that hope and commitment to the establishment of God’s Kingdom in full in which Jesus will light our world, and God’s righteousness and justice will be everywhere apparent.

Let us pray: Dearest God, help us to be helpers to one another. Help us to encourage one another. Help us to seek the best for one another. Help us be the people you created us to be, helpmates to one another that we may be fully human, fully alive. Remind us also that you seek to be our help and that we need to seek you out in prayer, worship, and service to you. Help us

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to keep our focus on matters that are ultimate and not let our disappointments with our leaders and our institutions keep us from the joy of ministry and mission in your name. Amen.