

Well Prepared

Second Sunday of Advent
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December 6, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 1:68-79;
Philippians 1:30-31; Luke 3:1-6

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Those of you who use a computer to write letters or reports are familiar with an attachment in your computer called a template. These templates provide readymade outlines for various letters and reports. Just a few key strokes and you can choose which template best suits your purpose and then you write your document using the outline provided by the template. Just like the templates those of you who sew might use when you're making a garment.

Now if you give it some careful thought, it won't take you long to realize that baptism is something like a template. This is made clear by the messenger promised in our first reading in Malachi, who was to come to prepare the way of the Lord and who finally arrives in our Gospel reading this morning. The Gospel makes the announcement that the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, whom we call John the Baptist, and who was, at the time, in the wilderness.

Things had been going badly for the people of Israel. The Romans were in control and the political and religious authorities were in league with them. The people suffered greatly as a result. And it was into the midst of this trouble that John announced the approach of their rescue. It was time, John proclaimed, to prepare the way of the Lord who was about to rescue them from their misery. They were to repent, to turn around from their old ways and to return to the ways of God – and they were to be forgiven for their wrongdoings and their sinfulness, all of which was to be accomplished through their baptism.

Baptism, the English language version of the Greek verb *baptismos*, I bathe. The people were familiar with this practice, since they regularly and routinely bathed before they entered the temple. So it is that this morning we baptized Aidan Joseph. In that act Aidan Joseph has become a child of God. Oh yes, he's still a child of his parents, but he is also a child of God. He has been marked indelibly as God's own and he has been given an inheritance; he is now an heir to the Kingdom of God.

In the promises his parents made on his behalf, the template for his life in Christ has been laid out for him, just as it was laid out for all of us in our baptism. But he won't be on his own, for he will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to accompany him as a lifelong companion, comforter and guide.

In just the same way, airline pilots use templates to guide them in their final approach to their destination. But use the wrong template, and disaster quickly follows. A world shattering example came to us on September 18, 1962 when a plane carrying passengers crashed with the loss of all lives at Endola in Zambia. The plane that crashed was carrying Dag Hammarskjöld

who, at the time, was the highly respected Secretary General of the United Nations. The plane flew into the ground just short of the runway. The news, for those of you who remember it, stunned the world. Experts were sent to see why the plane had crashed. Their investigation revealed that the engines were running perfectly well when the plane went into the ground. The weather was reasonably fair. All other functions of the plane were in working order. And the pilot was in excellent health. So, what went wrong?

What happened was this. The overworked pilot had used the wrong template. Instead of the template for landing at Endola, Zambia (the airport where he was headed), he was using the approach template for Endola in the Congo. There was a fatal altitude difference of 3,000 feet, meaning that the plane, quite literally, flew into the ground, short of the runway.

And that, beloved, raises a question for us: "What is the template we are currently using for our lives?" This is especially the case when the crises and challenges before us become so absorbing that our life in Christ takes second place to our own forms of crisis management.

Nor is this made any easier when we understand that God's love for us is so encompassing, so wide, so deep that He protects our freedom to make our own decisions and use whatever template we wish to fly the plane of our lives. Simply because we are baptized, simply because we are children of God, we are not promised a crisis-free, challenge-free life. Sorry to tell you Aidan, but trouble and suffering, discomfort and anguish are part and parcel of the human lot. If I was unloving, I might tell you to get used to it. But we have the firm and unshakable promise that even though events in our life overwhelm us and seem insurmountable, we are not alone. God's presence, His companionship, His compassion, and His love are with us, no matter what. It is also true, that from time to time, when we make the wrong choices, when we act on the wrong information, He is still present to us. Martin Luther described our condition as being at one and the same time saints and sinners.

But all is not lost. When things have gone badly, just as they had for the people of Israel in John's time, there remains the divine invitation to repent and to remember the promises of God and to renew our lives by returning again to following in the footsteps of Christ.

Because our lives are frequently punctuated by errors, failures, and sins, the church has made Holy Communion frequently available to us. This tiny little meal which we'll receive – a wafer and a sip of wine – contains God's promise of salvation and works His forgiveness. If nothing else, we can remember the taste and the texture and the touch of the bread and wine, even if we can't remember our baptism. And as double assurance, there is always water in this font in which you can dip your fingers and make the sign of the cross as a reminder of your own baptism. After the service, before the service, when you have received communion, you are more than welcome to go to the font and remember your baptism.

It is on our behalf, as much as it was for the people in John's time, that John's preaching quoted the words of Isaiah: "Make ye ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

For some people the experience of Christ is dramatic and sudden and life changing. But for many of us, that experience came upon us slowly, like the unfolding and blooming of a rosebud. The actual progress of the blooming of a rose is not visible to the naked eye, but the end result is.

Just so, the experience of Washington Gladden, a famous pastor at the turn of the twentieth century. You see, Gladden experienced real agony because he felt he could not find Christ. He tried for years to gain the assurance of divine love. He listened intently in prayer meetings to the testimony of those who had found it; he attended every revival meeting which came along; he followed the suggestions which others prescribed in their books and in their preaching. He tried to surrender himself a thousand times, but nothing, absolutely nothing seemed to happen. He never seemed to find or feel what others did.

Then one day he met a minister who was sensitive and caring and clear-headed. This minister told Gladden that he could trust God's love whether he had any ecstatic experiences of him or not; Gladden did not have to do anything to be loved – God already loved him. That was the word he needed to hear. Trusting in God's love he was led into a life of notable ministry. He brought incisive application of the gospel to the social issues of the day, and helped shape the history of the whole church in America. It was Washington Gladden who wrote that great hymn:

O Master, let me walk with thee
in lowly paths of service free;
Tell me thy secret; help me bear
the strain of toil, the fret of care.
Help me the slow of heart to move
by some clear, winning word of love;
Teach me the wayward feet to stay,
and guide them in the home-ward way.

Washington Gladden had no sudden conversion experience but found himself loved by God, and so God prepared his heart for Christ's coming.

And Aidan Joseph though you may well be unaware of it, from this day forth you will be cradled in the arms of God and be given the freedom to become whomever you are meant to be. And God, in His own good time and in His own loving way, will prepare you, along with all of us, for the saving coming of Christ. Just so it is for Aidan Joseph's parents and those of you here present at his baptism who have promised to pray for him – it's an awesome responsibility, don't forget it. We have also promised to walk with him and to accompany him as he and we together attempt to follow in the footsteps of Christ. And when things go wrong, there is a loving and forgiving God constantly present to set him right and us right, to get him and us back on the path.

The astounding thing is that no matter what, no matter what we are God's beloved people in this life and the next. We don't have to earn God's love, compassion, and salvation that was all arranged for us and paid for on the first Easter. The whole thing is an extraordinary, unconditional gift. All we are asked to do is respond with lives that imitate the life of Christ. Listen carefully, because I think it goes something like this.

There was a bicycle shop in a little town that was constantly busy with the run-up to Christmas. One winter, a young boy wandered in, dirty-faced, poorly dressed and obviously not from a well-to-do family. Although at first the staff was worried about his shoplifting something, it soon became clear that the child was harmless enough. He would just come in, look closely one at a time at all the new bicycles that were there waiting to be bought as Christmas gifts, and then stand out of the way in the corner of the room and watch the men work.

This went on for some time. He seemed to spend more and more time watching the repair shop part of the enterprise. And then one day, after a large group of customers had just left, the young child made a beeline over to where some of the men were working. He laid a rusty old bolt on the counter in front of them. "Excuse me," he said politely, "would you be able to put a new bike on this bolt?"

Like us, the men laughed. Only a child would think of putting a bike on a bolt instead of a bolt on a bike. The men's laughter wasn't intended to be mean or harmful, and neither was ours, but cut the little boy's feelings to the quick. He didn't understand, but he knew something he had said must have been terribly wrong; he backed away and left the shop. The men ran outside after him, but the kid had disappeared.

A few weeks later, he was back. This time, however, if anything, he was even more reluctant to make eye contact with anyone at the store. He looked carefully at every new bike on display, as always, carefully scrutinizing each in turn. But this time he kept his head down whenever anyone came near. Then he went to the repair area where he had given the men the bolt. His head was down, as if he were embarrassed or had done something wrong, and he kept fingering the hole in his pants. One of the men repairing bikes called to him: "Hey kid!" He looked up. "You forgot your bolt." And with that one of the staff wheeled out and presented the boy a bicycle. It was made entirely out of scrap parts that the store workers had salvaged on their own time. All for the love of a child.

Amen.