

***“Seeing the Gospel”***

***“All flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*** What amazing words those are. The deepest sense of these words is that peace, harmony, health and healing will break out all over the world! ***“All flesh shall see . . .”*** means that every single human being on earth will see this come to pass. Sounds impossible doesn't it? This promise from the prophet Isaiah, brought to us in the gospel of Luke courtesy of John the Baptist brings to mind the words of Jesus to his disciples, ***“For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.”*** [Matt. 19:26]

Try to imagine what it would be like: War is just a memory... Hunger and poverty a thing of the past ... Every human being experiences love and caring community ... sounds like heaven doesn't it? And . . . when you look at the state of human affairs these days, it sounds impossible . . . For mortals.

Nevertheless, this is a time of year for dreaming. Many of our children are writing lists of all the things that they think would fulfill their dreams. The child within each of us reaches out for the wonder and mystery of this “season of good cheer.” One person I read this week described his feelings about the Christmas season this way: *“It is as though we take leave of the real world for a time and wait for that wonderful something that will come to us all and bring peace and joy to the world — but it never quite arrives and we wait for another year to dream again.”*

If somehow you were given the gift of writing a headline for the morning newspaper that would come true as you wrote it — what would that headline be? Would it be the kind of headline that fills our newspapers today? Of course not. Deep within our hearts we want good news and not bad news. Life is filled with bad news. Wouldn't it be wonderful to see good news break out in our national newspapers, radio and TV broadcasts?

A teacher asked a group of high school young people to write headlines

they would love to see. They then voted on the best, and here are the top six from the group: *“Peace declared all over earth!” “Hunger and poverty to be eliminated by year's end!” “No reports of child abuse in the US for over a year!” “Religious tolerance at an all time high!” “Vaccine for all forms of cancer discovered!” “Officials to investigate complete absence of violent crime!”*

*“Wonderful dreams, but not very realistic,”* you say. *“Impossible!”* You would be right with such thinking. Human beings on their own will never bring such a thing about. In the words of scripture, ***“For mortals it is impossible . . .”*** Yet, there is a promise which is deep at the center of our faith that points to a spiritual truth that lies at the center of this season and calls us to be ready for God to intervene in the world: ***“but for God all things are possible.”***

In plain talk, here is the message John the Baptist proclaimed in the wilderness of Judea. Though the message is an ancient one, it speaks quite directly to the spiritual wilderness of our contemporary world: *“Make room for God!” “Get rid of everything in your life that is a barrier to God!” “Every person will see the promises of God come to pass!”*

There is a natural division of this message into two areas of concern. There is first of all, the area of: *“That which is possible for mortals . . .”* and *“That which is possible only for God.”*

*“That which is possible for mortals . . .”*

When John the Baptist brought his message to the wilderness, he said there were two things we need to do in our relationship with God. First of all, we need to make room for God. ***“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”*** It is easy to find our lives so cluttered and busy that there is no room for our relationship with God. There are times when our religious activity is rather perfunctory. The hard thing is that the times we celebrate the central events of the Christian faith is precisely the time when the pace of our lives is most hectic.

Think about it. Are you prepared for the holiday season? Are your cards all written, shopping done and preparations for holiday company completed? [shudder] Those of you who raised your hands should know that you are the objects of suspicion and animus for all the rest of us who haven't gotten a single thing done of our holiday checklist.

And in all of this — have you made room for God in the center of your life for this Advent season? Is God's way into the center of your heart a straight and easy path or is the way cluttered and winding? The intent here is not to add more clutter in our lives by way of feeling guilty (although, guilt has gotten a bad name and the fact is that there are times when guilt is in order!)

However, a proper response to John's message is intentionally to address a question to every aspect of our celebration of Christmas this year. *“Where is God in all this?”* We aim that question at our shopping and spending, our relationships and family life and our inner life. Reflect on this: *“How can I make a straighter path and more room for God in my life?”*

Secondly, we need to get rid of everything in our lives that is a barrier to God. When John the Baptist spoke the words of the prophet Isaiah about the leveling of the mountains and the lifting up of the valleys, he was talking about justice and righteousness becoming the norm. He was pointing to a world where “good news” was a reality. He spoke of the kind of world it would be when God was truly in charge, a world Jesus said his ministry would be all about: ***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*** [Luke 4:18-19]

To celebrate the Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ is to line up our lives with God's purposes and join the followers of Jesus Christ in bringing “good news” to the corner of the world we inhabit. One of the great Christmas gifts I have ever heard of is a church where individuals and

families were urged to include in their preparations for the season the giving of a significant gift for the work of Christ. This was an extra gift — not for the local church — but to somehow bring good news to the poor, or freedom for those in bondage, or healing for those who are ill. They called it a “Spirit of the Lord Gift,” and a part of the Christmas Eve service included lifting up all the groups and persons who had received a “Spirit of the Lord Gift.” You’ve probably heard or read about other churches doing something similar. When we turn our attention outward and purpose to follow Christ in our giving and reaching out, we automatically begin to work on removing the barriers to God's presence in our lives and in our world!

That brings us to “*That which is possible only for God . . .*”

When we have done all we can do to make room for God and to remove barriers to the presence of God, it is time to trust God for the outcome of all things. We have some control over our actions and even a modicum of influence on the world around us — beginning with our own small part of the world. But — we are not able to bring about the stunning completion of all things — the final goal of God's divine purposes, namely: “***All flesh shall see the salvation of God!***”

Do you see? Advent and Christmas is all about a world that finally realizes that it is under the sovereign rule of God. This is the good news that can not be rescinded or denied. In the deepest sense, Advent and Christmas is the celebration of victory in a war against everything that is wrong. Yet, the battles have yet to be completed and the time of fulfillment lies ahead. The victory is secured in our faith and is being worked out in our lives.

That's what Advent and Christmas are all about. Give yourselves once again to the wonderful victory of God's divine purposes in our world. A new world which is described in some of the last words in our Bible:

***“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,***

*prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”* [Revelation 21:1-4]

John the Baptist said it best, “*...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 the salvation of God.*”

The advantage for us is this: we see it already upon us, as we look into a manger, then in the Temple, and in the Jordan River, as we watch along Judean highways, in homes and fields, and finally on a cross — we behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

We see the Gospel in Jesus Christ, “*the salvation of God.*” We long to see Him in ourselves and in each other. When we serve Him by serving others, there also we see the Gospel at work, as we “*Prepare the way of the Lord . . .*”

Amen.