

Sermons from Park Hill: December 9, 2007

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11: 1-9, Luke 3: 2a-6
“In-Between Living”

These are in-between times. In-between having some idea of what to buy for presents and actually going shopping. In-between having some sense of who I may send Christmas cards to and actually making a list, let alone writing and addressing all of them. These are in-between times of another sort too. Do you know the squeeze of in-between living? How do I choose between taking care of others and taking care of myself? How do I choose between what is injustice to someone else and what is convenience and low price for me? How do I choose between paying for prescriptions and paying for food? In-between medical tests and getting their results. In-between job dissatisfaction and new career directions. I believe we know the squeeze of in-between living.

Sometimes we speak of being in-between a rock and a hard place...feeling stuck, having no choices. Advent is custom made for this, so I'd like to suggest another meaning: perhaps we could use the metaphor of a rock and a hard place positively. The rock is God – a place of absolute security, unshakable. The hard place is the message of John the Baptist – the busy body who is always nosing his way in our business. But, he assures us, we are not stuck. So, he tells us to Prepare. Change. Reconcile. Turn. And (don't tell anyone I used this word) repent. Prepare - by cleaning out the chimney soot of anger and resentment. Change – attitudes of jealousy and greed. Reconcile – with enemies, or, certainly before Christmas, in-laws. Turn – from habits that will lead to an early grave. And repent. Talk about a word that puts me in-between a rock and a hard place! But just give me a chance.

Again, the rock is God's love. The hard place is John's truth. He's right. When we ignore the needs of our neighbors, we shun, we push away from God's love. When we refuse to forgive – others or forgive ourselves – we shun, we push away from God's love. Squeezed. We find ourselves right in-between love and repentance. Repent is a hard word; and sometimes it's a toxic word. But it's simply a biblical call to listen, to think about what we're doing or where we are going, and turn in a different direction. In Advent, it's so we are ready to receive God's love shown again in Christmas.

Repentance, though used like a weapon sometimes by over-zealous preachers, is just a

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recognition that we have some things we need to change and that's we're able to do it. We are not stuck without choices – in-between knowing it and doing it. Again, anger, resentments, jealousies, greed, healthier choices for our bodies and our environment... Social justice is all about getting the powerful to repent, to recognize that they are often acting in their own personal interests instead of the interests of vulnerable people and the fragile planet. We demand that they listen to us, sometimes just a little voice in the distance, and change.

We can blame everyone else, but within our own personal lives, we are also pretty powerful people. You and I control a lot. As people of faith, during this time of Advent, it is important to listen to that wilderness voice, to consider *our* power, and examine what we are doing and what direction we are travelling. It's important to look up and see the signposts, the road markers that tell us where we are heading, and whether it's where we *want* to be going. We're all on a journey – that's life – and in Advent, it's toward Christmas. Is our destination the mall or the church? John the Baptist will never make an appearance at the mall – and if he did, he'd be promptly escorted out. His message would certainly not be welcome. Consumerism, materialism, conspicuous consumption. Busy body stuff amidst the fun. Do we welcome him here today? He proclaims a message of peace – but it's the kind of expensive peace that takes our time. Maybe too much time for such a busy season when we are in-between shopping and wrapping. Because it's the kind of expensive peace that makes us think and challenges us.

So what does John the Baptist want? Let's go back to Luke chapter 3 and read verses 10-14.

Tax collectors and soldiers were certainly between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand, acting as agents of the empire, doing their job and, on the other side, maintaining their integrity. Gee, that may be where some of you work too! Caught in-between corporate greed and doing what you feel is right – *and* keeping your job. Squeezed. That's also the "between-the-rock" that is God's love and the "hard place" that calls us to listen and make conscious choices for living with integrity. Today we're invited to look up at the sign posts and road markers and ask, "Am I doing what is right or expedient?" "Am I on the right road, the road I want to be on, or am I wondering, 'Where am I and who have I become?'"

Listen to a small voice off in the distance. If we're not heading where we want, just look up. Turn in a new direction. If we're angry, chill. If we resent someone's accomplishments, or unearned recognition, so what? If we're feeling jealous or a little greedy, whine and then get over it. If we have hurt a loved one, ask forgiveness. If we've cheated someone, don't do it again. John's admonishment is simply to do the right thing – and if we're not, do it differently. Tax collectors – don't take more than you're supposed to. Soldiers – don't threaten anyone and take their money; don't lie. These are not life-shattering decisions, yet they could turn our lives upside down. Once we've gotten used to something, even when it is wrong, it's

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hard to change. While the high school youth from my last church and I were on the Pine Ridge Reservation last summer we heard a young Lakota man speak. He had some especially challenging messages for the teen-aged boys in our group. One of the things he said was simply, if you have a girlfriend, don't cheat on her. One boy later broke down with me because he was thinking about doing that very thing. It wasn't a life-shattering decision, but deciding not to changed him. He became a young man; he was proud of himself. We have to listen sometimes to hard things; listen differently than our culture, and change, so that we put ourselves in a spiritually-ready place. We have to consciously and prayerfully think about it. And simply *desire* to move beyond that hard place in-between decision and destination.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, expressed that challenge: "My God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I fully know myself, and the fact that I think I am listening to your will does not actually mean that I am doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing."

We have to listen to a different voice; we may even have to listen to ourselves and let ourselves make the decisions, not someone else who honestly doesn't care anything about us. Regardless, listen carefully. Living in-between being a faithful Christian and being an American consumer or corporate citizen takes

practice. The voice crying in the wilderness is always more difficult to hear.

One busy Saturday morning two friends were at the mall. There were all kinds of noises – carols playing on the sound system, Santa's ho-ho-hoing, cash registers, gadgets whirring at the entrance to the stores, kids crying – you've been to a mall. You can imagine the scene. Amidst all this noise, one of the friends turned to the other and said "I hear a cricket."

"No way," her friend responded. "How could you possibly hear a cricket with all this racket? You must be imagining it."

"No, I really do hear a cricket. I'll show you."

She stopped and listened more carefully, and then led her friend to a large planter with poinsettias in it. Pushing back some leaves, she found a little brown cricket.

"That's amazing. You must have superhuman hearing! What's your secret?"

"No, my hearing is the same as yours. There's no secret, but I may listen differently," she replied. "Watch; I'll show you."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out some loose change and threw it on the mall floor. In the middle of all that noise, everything for 30 feet went quiet. Even Santa looked up, eager to see if he could grab it first. Everyone heard the money and wanted to know where it might be.

"See," she said. "It's all a matter of what you are listening for."

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The conventional wisdom of living in-between a rock and a hard place means that you are stuck; that you have no good choices. John the Baptist would disagree. Advent wisdom comes from knowing that instead, we are in-between the solid rock of God's love and the hard place of realizing we may, and can, and maybe must, have to change to make to be sure that we are fully prepared to welcome the Prince of Peace; that we are on the path of peace, however expensive it might be. But wow. What valuable, life-affirming-for-everyone, peace it will be. Peace full of integrity. Peace that feels right. Peace full of justice.