

THE CHRISTMAS YOU'VE ALWAYS LONGED FOR  
SLOW DOWN FOR REFLECTION

Luke 1:39-45, 56  
November 29, 2009

Have you ever wondered where we preachers get our sermon ideas? I remember when I was getting ready to graduate from the seminary and pastor my first church. The realization came to me that I was going to be preaching a message every Sunday. What in the world was I going to say?

I called up my mentor and friend, Rev. Frank Leineke, and asked him what he did. Frank told me about the Lectionary. Every week there is an Old Testament reading, an Epistle, a Gospel reading and a section from the Psalms. Basically you read the texts for the day and select the one you want to preach on. If one follows the Lectionary, he or she will move through all the major themes and stories of the Bible in 3 years.

For the first 14 years of my ministry, I was basically a Lectionary preacher. In 2001 however I was moved to the Tawas United Methodist Church. That appointment changed my preaching style. The Tawas church had two worship services: one traditional, one contemporary. The contemporary service had a Planning Team. The team would meet weekly and plan all the elements for the worship service.

The team had discovered the advantages of having sermon series. Not only did the congregation enjoy the continuity the series provided, it made the planning process a whole lot easier. On my arrival to Tawas I was informed that I should plan on continuing the sermon series process.

Rather than reinventing the wheel, the Planning Team shared with me resources they had from other churches. There in those resources were suggested titles and texts for complete sermon series. Some even came with finished sermons. Though I never preached any of those sermons, I did take the ideas and illustrations.

One company that produces such resources is called Mainstay Ministry. I became acquainted with this company my first Fall at Tawas. We were planning our Advent/Christmas Season. The year before they had used a resource from Mainstay and were pleased with the materials. A breakfast was planned in Flint to showcase Mainstay's newest Christmas resources. I

went with another Planning Team member. We selected one of the packages and used it at the Tawas Church.

That was December 2001. I believe we used another Mainstay package in 2002. In 2003 we made up our own Advent/Christmas Series. Two thousand and two (2002) was the last time I had any dealings with Mainstay Ministry. To be truthful I had forgotten about them until this past September. I was making out the worship schedule for the rest of the year. As I was considering what I was going to do for Advent, I looked through my Advent/Christmas folder. There in the folder was a one-page promotion for Mainstay Ministry.

I read over the various packages they offered. I remembered the two we did in Tawas “The Christmas Touch” and “Seasoning the Season”. One of the themes caught my imagination. It was titled “The Christmas You’ve Always Longed For”. Below the theme there were the suggested Sunday Sermon titles.

It was right then that I decided to borrow from Mainstay and use this as my Advent Series. Those that received my letter concerning Commitment Sunday also got this flyer. On the flyer are the sermon titles:

Slow Down for Reflection  
Keep a Christ Centered Focus  
Manage the Inevitable Distractions  
Celebrate Whatever your Circumstances  
Enjoy a God Pleasing Christmas Season.

I did not purchase the packet from Mainstay. All I had was the theme and titles. Given the commercialization of Christmas, given the business of the holidays, given the stress that many feel this time of year, I thought this message would resonate with people.

Now I could be presumptuous. Who knows, maybe most of you are happy with how your holidays have gone. And for those that are not, the Christmas that one may long for might be totally different than the Christmas longed for by someone else.

Whether you are longing for a different kind of Christmas or not, let’s see what can be done to have a more meaningful Advent and Christmas Season.

As I began to write this message I went to Mainstay's Web site. I was curious what direction they took when dealing with this subject. I found they focused on Mary. It was what she did before, during and after the birth of Jesus that teaches us some lessons about how we could approach the holidays.

As we began the service we heard the Annunciation. This is the story of the Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she was going to bear God's Son. Later in our Scripture Lesson we heard what Mary did after she received the message. "Soon afterward Mary got ready and hurried off to a town in the hill country of Judea. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth."

Can you imagine the thoughts and emotions Mary was feeling? A Miraculous thing has just happened to her. Mary was going to a mother! I would think her mind was racing as she contemplated what this baby was going to mean to her life. Who knows maybe there were a number of things she wanted to take care of before this baby came along. Instead of getting into busy mode, Mary goes off and spends some time in the country with her relative Elizabeth. How long did she spend with Elizabeth and Zechariah? Three months!

For many people the holidays are viewed with mixed emotions. On the one hand they enjoy the time with family, the exchange of gifts and festive meals. On the other hand there is all the business that goes into preparing for Christmas. Whether written or not, many folks have a checklist of things needed to be done. As Christmas gets closer and closer and there are still items on the list that are not marked off, the stress level rises.

If we can find a way to slow down just a little, reflect on why we are preparing for Christmas, then maybe we will be less stressed this year. Slowing down however is easier said than done. Life has a way of keeping us busy.

The only way we can follow Mary's lead is by intentionally finding time for reflection. Mary physically left her home and went to another location. Maybe we can think of a place we can go every day or every other day to slow down and reflect. This could be a place in our house. It could happen

while taking a walk. This might also happen if we get in the car and just take a drive.

Simon and Garfunkel sang a song. “Slow down, you move too fast. You got to make the morning last. Just kicking down the cobble stones, looking for fun and feeling groovy.”

When we find ourselves stressed this Holiday Season, feeling like we have so much to do, just sing to yourself - Slow down your moving too fast. You got to make this season last. Just reflecting on the Christmas Story, looking for peace and feeling grounded.”

Can you sing that with me?

SLOW DOWN YOUR MOVING TOO FAST.  
WE GOT TO MAKE THIS SEASON LAST.  
JUST REFLECTING ON THE CHRISTMAS STORY,  
LOOKING FOR PEACE AND FEELING GROUNDED.

We have already begun our march toward Christmas. There will be things that we will want to do between now and Christmas Day. I encourage you to make it a point to spend some with God. If we are able to do that, I bet we will be at a much better place December 25<sup>th</sup>.