

The Third Sunday in Advent – 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a crooked man, and he walked a **crooked** mile, He found a **crooked** sixpence against a **crooked** stile; He bought a **crooked** cat which caught a **crooked** mouse, and they all lived together in a little **crooked** house.

It's a children's nursery rhyme, a Mother Goose poem that we used to recite when we were kids. It's English, obviously. Sixpence is a dead give-away. There was a crooked man, and he walked a crooked mile... yep, that's me. How many of y'all have a checkered past? How many of y'all have ever been off the straight and narrow? You've heard of King Midas? In ancient Greek mythology, whatever King Midas touched turned to gold. Upon receiving this power, he touched the roses in his garden and they instantly turned to gold. Midas' daughter entered his throne room, distraught that her favorite flowers had lost their pleasing aroma. Midas reached out to console her and she too turned to gold. Heartbroken, Midas despised his gift and died forlorn. There was a crooked man who walked a crooked mile. Everything this crooked man touched seems to turn bent, misshapen, out of alignment. Perhaps that's how Adam felt, Adam and Eve. "Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

How was it for Adam and Eve to see their son, Cain, kill their son Abel. A crooked man had a crooked son who took a crooked rock and committed a crooked crime. We are, all of us, out of alignment. Have you ever seen a car going down the street sideways? It's an odd sight. The alignment of the steering is so jacked up that in order for the car to drive straight you have to turn the wheel all the way to the right. If you are behind a car like this you can see both doors, the front door and the back-seat door while driving *behind* them. Even a four-year-old, who sees this problem, will say: Daddy, what wrong with that car? There was a crooked man who walked a crooked mile. Sin; it warps us on the inside. Let's say all the sin in your life is turned into alcohol – every sin you commit is a shot of whiskey that goes directly into your system and then the policeman wants to do a field sobriety test on you. His field sobriety test is a not so much a test of dexterity or coordination, but a test of righteousness. A field righteousness test and you are loaded out of your mind on whiskey slash sin. Do you pass? Does the one administering the field righteousness test know that you are a crooked man who has walked a crooked mile? A child, who sees this whole thing play out on the side of the road, asks: Daddy, what's wrong with that man?

Sinful man lives for sinful man. The crooked man who walked a crooked mile didn't give a rip how crooked he was – until he heard John the Baptist, until the Word of God came smashing into his ears, until the Holy Spirit brought the fire of His love into the heart of the sinner. John the Baptist knew what plagued the people of Israel and it wasn't the coronavirus. "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" (John 1:23). The Lord Christ, the Messianic King, the Righteous Son of God was approaching. He is pure, holy and He will judge the living and the dead. None escapes His checkpoint. He is the only avenue to life, the only path to heaven. Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). It is said in love. It is said in transparent honesty: “I am the Way.” It is not a metaphor. He alone is our righteousness. He is the straight man who willingly came into a crooked world to carve a straight path of obedience.

There was a crooked man who walked a crooked mile – and he was loved by the Son of God. The crooked man saw where the Savior walked – from Pontius Pilate’s praetorium to the place of the Skull. There Christ was exalted, lifted up on a crooked cross. It was unjust and yet it was Divine Love. He alone walked the straight path, perfectly, a man unbent by sin, without Adam’s stain. Jesus had no human father, no original sin, no death in His blood – but He died, bearing our crookedness. He died, loving us to the end, loving us to the full. He died to blaze the Way, the Way we now walk. You have seen His glory. You know His love, His righteousness, how inextricably intertwined they are, how they fill your soul with gratitude, with hope, with a yearning for what is good and lasting and true. What is good and lasting and true is His sacrifice, which is in you. The Lord Christ makes crooked you straight. He makes you holy. He makes you desire what is good and lasting and true. He is the Way. He walks *with* you and He makes you to walk *in* Him. Christians are those who walk in the Way. It is not a metaphor. It is a vibrant descriptor of what it means to believe – you walk with Christ every day of your life. You forsake the crooked and twisted ways of sinful man, you despise the sin in your own life and you repent, you seek to serve others, to personify the Savior who is at work in you; you love others as He has first loved you – you walk in the Way.

There was a crooked man who walked a crooked mile and then he had John the Baptist in his ear: Make straight the way of the Lord. Not tomorrow, not next week, not in the new year... NOW! All that useless self-interest, all that useless and vain materialism, that vapid greed, that senseless lust, that filthy corruption and the cords of death that entangle us and keep us on a crooked path – it is thrown off (Hebrews 12:1-2). Make straight the way of the Lord. That is what we do. Our lives, we clear the obstacles, as well as we can. In this church, we walk in the Way, the Way of Holiness – it belongs to us. Christ has given it to us, this Way (Isaiah 35:8). He, in a way that we cannot, He cleared it of the obstacle of death. The sin that stood against us, He took it (Colossians 2:14). He became crooked on the Holy Cross with our sin to clear the obstacle of death from your path. The Way of life, and light, and holiness – He paved it with His blood. Is it not your joy to walk on it? To sing of His beauty and to walk after Him in the Way? Crooked men who have walked crooked miles are welcome in this place. Crooked men who have walked crooked miles are welcome in Christ’s church. “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ came into the world to save the crooked of whom I am the crookedest.” That is what St. Paul said (kind of).

Make straight the way of the Lord. In times of virus and in times when there is no virus. When the governor tells you that you mustn’t and when the governor gives you his imperial leave to do so. When everyone around you wants to sell you on the crooked path and when others are turning to make straight His paths as well. In season and out of season, make straight the way of the Lord. He is coming. He intends to come and bring you home. “And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing: everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isaiah 35:10). Marianne has come into Zion with singing. Gladness and joy are hers without interruption! Our sister travelled the straight path, she walked in the Way that is Christ and she has come home to Zion.

Christ made her path straight. From our homes the Lord has brought us here, to receive His resurrection, to partake of His righteousness, to discover how deep and wide and broad is the grace of God. There was a crooked man who got in his crooked car and drove a crooked mile to eat and drink at the Lord's table. Grace came to the crooked man and he rejoiced to have it!

I am about to conclude with two verses from Isaiah, two sublime verses of Scripture that capture what John the Baptist prepared, what was manifest in the most magnificent way when Jesus was on the cross, and what we will see when He returns. Look for Him now. Look for the fulfillment of these verses as we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. See the fulfillment of Isaiah as you walk up to this altar and receive His body and blood. "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 40:4-5).