



Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
December 15, 2019

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A young Irish man robbed a bank and was caught and convicted. The police interrogated him for hours but he refused to tell them what he'd done with all the money he'd stolen. A few months after he went to jail his father wrote him a letter: "Son, this year, I can't plant potatoes because you are not here to plow the field. I'm afraid your Ma and I will starve because of your irresponsible life."

The son wrote back, "Papa, don't dare plow the field. That's where I hid the money I stole." Of course, the authorities are intercepting all his mail, so a few days later the police turn up and tear the farm apart, but they don't find anything even though they dig up every patch of ground they can get to. Then the son writes his father and says, "Now you can plant your potatoes."

In the spirit of "letters from prison," our gospel story today is about a message sent from John the Baptist to Jesus while John was in prison for doing what God had called him to do. The gist of John's prison letter is a heartfelt plea to Christ that we have probably all expressed at some point in our lives: "Lord, is this really the way this is supposed to be happening?"

Jesus responds by trying to help John see that events are unfolding in a way that fits with who God is even if they are unfolding in a way that no one expected. And Jesus makes this interesting comment: "blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." The Greek word translated there as "offense" is the word *skandalon*, so another translation might be "blessed is anyone who isn't scandalized by who Jesus is and what Jesus is doing."

John is at risk of being scandalized by Jesus' ministry because he is facing one of the greatest dangers of the spiritual life, a danger that we all face: it is the danger of false expectations. We can see it in simple ways, such a desire to have a perfect Christmas and the subsequent sadness and anger when Christmas goes wrong. We can also see this danger in complicated ways, such as the desire to have a perfect marriage or a perfect

church. When life doesn't turn out the way we expected or the way we wanted then we're disturbed, sad, angry, maybe even scandalized. It leaves us, like John, asking "Lord, is this really the way this is supposed to be happening?"

In his effort to help John see past this struggle, Jesus is challenging him to pause, to listen, to go deeper into his connection with God and Jesus is challenging you and me to do the same this Advent.

I'm mindful today of times in my life when I, like John, have been scandalized by Jesus and wondered "Lord, is this really the way this is supposed to be happening?" In particular I'm thinking of my journey in pastoral ministry because this past Friday, the 13th, was the 22nd anniversary of my first ordination.

Back when all this started I wasn't Episcopal, I was part of a denomination called Grace Communion. Beth and I were newly married and freshly graduated from college and I was in my first year of law school at Campbell University. Halfway through that first year I had my first experience of being scandalized by Jesus' way of flipping my expectations upside down: I realized that I had been sensing a call to pastoral ministry all of my life, going all the way back to childhood. I realized that I didn't really feel called to be a lawyer, in fact, the plan that was swimming around in the back of my mind was to practice law for 10 or 20 years and then switch careers and enter ordained ministry.

It seemed as though Jesus was asking me, "why are you planning to live your life backwards? Try ministry first and if that doesn't work then you can go practice law." Jesus was challenging me to pause, to listen, to go deeper into my connection with God through him and the result was a complete change in the direction of my life. I switched from Campbell's law school to their Seminary and on December 13, 1997, I was ordained.

My first pastoral assignment out of Seminary was a two church circuit in Nashville, TN, and I was there for 12 years. I found the ministry fulfilling and I did well enough that no one tried to run me off, but as the years went by I began to feel more and more trapped. I can resonate just a little bit with John the Baptist in the sense that I came to feel I was in a kind of prison – I was confined in a place of ministry that was no longer a good fit for me.

I was mowing my lawn on the Friday before Memorial Day weekend of 2011 and doing something I often did while mowing the lawn: I was griping to myself about all the ways I felt trapped in my ministry. As I half prayed and half talked to myself I said something I had often said to myself before: "I ought to leave this de-

nomination and go become an Episcopalian.” I often muttered this to myself because I’d had an affinity for the Episcopal church for many years. In fact, all the years I was a pastor I kept the *Book of Common Prayer* right next to the Bible on my desk. But this time was different. This time, when I muttered to myself that I ought to make this big change, I seemed to hear Jesus say, “well, why not? What’s to stop you from switching?” For the second time in my life Jesus flipped my expectations upside down and I had that scandalous experience where I found myself saying ““Lord, is this really the way this is supposed to be happening?””

For the second time in my life Jesus was challenging me to pause, to listen, and to go deeper into my connection with God through him. To quickly summarize months and months of agonizing prayer and conversations that Beth and I had together and with trusted friends: we made the switch and it was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made. But it wasn’t easy. I still sensed a calling to pastoral ministry, but Jesus had another scandal waiting for me: the Episcopal church would not simply transfer my ordination, I would have to be ordained yet again.

This has been a particularly tough one for me over the last 7 years. That’s because there is a sense in which the Episcopal approach to ordination seems to imply that all the years I spent preaching, baptizing, celebrating the Eucharist, and being a pastor weren’t real or meaningful. After all, if I have to be ordained a second time in order to continue following my calling in the Episcopal church, doesn’t that imply that my first ordination was wrong or invalid somehow? Again, in a very small way I sort of identify with John the Baptist. In part he is asking Jesus, “what about all that has gone before this? Now that I’m in this new place, still trying to follow you, does it mean that all I did before was meaningless?”

Interestingly, the theology of the Episcopal church, as expressed in our canons about ordination, actually seeks to avoid implying that there was something defective about my first ordination. In accordance with the canons of the church, at my ordination Bishop Jose began with these words: “Acknowledging the ministry which Jonathan has already received and hereby adding to that commission the grace and authority of Holy Orders . . .” etc.

So, officially, the Episcopal church recognizes that my ordination here is an addition to my previous ordination, not a brand new ordination. But unofficially, it is often difficult for my fellow Episcopalians to see the big picture of my life’s story the way I see it. For example, it took over 6 years of conversations and a second Master’s degree for me to be allowed to function as a pastor in an Episcopal parish. As Jesus called me to pa-

tiently work through those years I was somewhat scandalized by what Jesus was up to and, frankly, questioning Jesus: “Lord, is this really the way this is supposed to be happening?” For the third time in my life as a pastor Jesus was challenging me to pause, to listen, and to go deeper into my connection with God through him. And I’m glad that I was able to do that because it brought me here to be able to serve Christ with all of you.

During this holy season of Advent, where might Christ be calling you to pause, to listen, and to go deeper in your connection with God through him? You may find that if you listen you will hear Jesus saying something slightly scandalous, something that makes you wonder, “Lord, is this really the way this is supposed to be happening?” The good news that I’ve discovered in my life, and the good news that Jesus was trying to help John see in our gospel story, is that those moments – stressful as they may be – are filled with promise, expectation, and hope. That’s because those moments are the moments when God begins to work, Christ begins to call, and our lives begin to change in a way that can be a blessing to us and to many others.

And, that’s how we get from Advent to Christmas. That’s how we get from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of heaven. That’s how we get from ordinary lives to extraordinary lives. By letting Christ call us from what is to what can be.

Amen.