

## **If I had a hammer**

Luke 3:1-6

December 6, 2009

Are you ready for Christmas?

What do you do to get ready for Christmas? You decorate the house. You decorate the tree. You do the Christmas shopping. You bake.

As we have put together this afternoon's program, *Around the World at Christmas*, it has been interesting to hear of some of the different ways people prepare for Christmas in other cultures. In Colombia, they celebrate a candle-lighting day when folks put candles on the sidewalks and in the streets. In the Ukraine, they do not hang wreaths or set out special decorations. Instead, they prepare the house by cleaning it especially well and putting a white tablecloth on the dining table.

Why? Why is it so important to us to be "ready"? For whom are we doing it? For our guests? For our families? Or are we doing it for ourselves? Are we so concerned to make the necessary preparations so that the blessings of the day will visit us and those we love?

What if we didn't? What if we weren't ready? Would Christmas not come? Or when it did come, would the blessings of the day not visit us? No. The holiday, the "holy-day," is itself both a sign and a means of God's grace. It comes to us with all its blessings as a gift, along with or even in spite of our preparations.

So why get ready? Because getting ready is part of the blessing of the day, part of the way we embrace the gift. In the process of getting ready for Christmas, we become Christmas! We become bearers of the spirit of welcome, the spirit of generosity, the spirit of peace. We become bearers of Christ!

That's why getting ready does matter.

Are you ready for Jesus? Are you ready for Jesus to come? Are you ready for Jesus' advent? That's what this season, the season of Advent, is about -- getting ready for Jesus to come. We do not merely "pretend" Jesus is not yet here, getting ready for him to be born. We retell the story as we get ready for Jesus to come here, again, at the end of this age, at the beginning of the new age of God's reign, the new age of God's kingdom. We are waiting for Jesus to come.

So, are you ready?

How do we get ready for Jesus? John the Baptist tells us how:

*Get the road ready for the Lord;  
make a straight path for the Lord to travel!  
Every valley must be filled up,  
every hill and mountain leveled off.  
The winding roads must be made straight,  
and the rough paths made smooth.*

Basically, it seems to me, we get ready for Jesus by turning the world into Iowa! In any case, it's a major reconstruction project -- leveling mountains and filling valleys and improving roadways -- preparing the earth itself for the Lord's arrival. It will require some serious tools: the powerful hammer of justice, the binding chain of peace, the relentless bulldozer of love.

It's a huge task, readying the earth, bringing shalom, making peace. That's why I say: peace is not a wish, it is a construction project! Peace on earth is both a gift and a mandate. Making peace is hard work, our work, our part in getting ready.

It's hard work filling and collecting and transporting thousands of shoeboxes, hundreds of layettes, bicycles and books and medical supplies. It takes a lot of planning, a lot of effort, a lot of money, a lot of persuading, a lot of persistence. But isn't that what Steve and Liz Thorpe and all their Rotary mates and all their church friends are doing? Getting ready? Making peace? Leveling mountains and filling valleys? Making the earth ready for the Lord by making it a more hospitable place for all God's children?

A major focus of the work of Rotary in Nicaragua is with mothers and children, not merely improving the present lives and livelihoods of people held down by poverty, but breaking the cycle of poverty by laying the groundwork for healthier and fuller and more productive lives for future generations. That's also one of the primary areas of concern for Oxfam, the project we have chosen to support this year with our Sunday School offerings. Oxfam supports the provision of free healthcare for all, especially for pregnant women and children, as a critical means both of preventing premature death and alleviating poverty.

Here's a typical story reported by one of their correspondents:

*Imagine the ultimate dilemma: if you cannot pay for health care, it costs you your life; and if you do pay, it still costs you your life because it pushes you into poverty and indebtedness ...*

*Urmila Nayak's husband in Orissa, India, is a daily wage labourer. [He] wanted to take her to the government hospital for the delivery of her first child, as she had also contracted malaria during her pregnancy. Not having the funds required to pay for the procedures and medicines, he sold his small piece of land. Sadly, his wife died during childbirth. Then he faced harassment due to [the] debt incurred for the medical procedures his wife had received ...*

*It is estimated that 40% of India's poor pay for hospitalization expenses by taking loans or selling assets. Consequently, over 20 million Indians are pushed below the poverty line every year as a result of such out of pocket expenses on health care ...*

Oxfam enthusiastically endorses Gordon Brown's recent UN initiative calling for support of free health care for children and pregnant women in Nepal, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Malawi and Burundi, a few of the nations that add to the 500,000 women worldwide who die annually for lack of health care during pregnancy and childbirth. That harsh reality is reflected in the life expectancy statistics for these countries. Life expectancy in Ghana is 59 years; in Malawi, 44 years; in Sierra Leone, 41 years.

Those figures are not going to change by wishing for it. It will take hard work, a sustained effort, a multi-faceted strategy, billions of dollars, and, above all, a refusal to keep silent as long as some are still denied reasonable access to health care, as long as some are still denied a just opportunity for life.

That's how we get ready. This is one of the ways we go about reconstructing the earth. Making shalom is about healing bodies. It's also about healing spirits.

*The Center for Victims of Torture* does its part in making rough paths smooth by offering counseling and rehabilitation services to victims of torture. People come from all over the world to its headquarters in Minneapolis, and to satellite centers in Sierra Leone, the Congo, and Jordan. It is hard work, requiring patience and skill and the belief that spirits and bodies shattered by unspeakable violations can be healed, can be made whole again.

These are some of the ways people are getting ready, some of the ways people are doing the hard work of making peace. But what can you do? How can you get ready for Jesus?

Many of you have helped with the Shoebox Project, donating your money or your time or both. You may donate to Oxfam through our Sunday School offering and learn more about its other programs through its website. *The*

*Center for Victims of Torture* is sponsoring a *Gift of Hope* program, encouraging folks to honor their loved ones during the holidays by making a donation to the Center's work in their name.

But none of that is very hard work. Maybe instead of writing a check, you could be the one to identify an unmet need and create a plan to address it and inspire people to join you.

Maybe in addition to making a donation to Oxfam, you could become an advocate for free healthcare, informing yourself on the issues, educating your neighbors, lobbying your representatives, being the squeaky wheel that refuses to be ignored.

Or maybe while applauding the work of *The Center for Victims of Torture*, you could befriend someone who has few friends, you could do the hard work of building a healing relationship with someone who resists it but needs it, you could do the hard work of reconciling with an estranged family member.

If you don't, if you fail to do the hard work of making peace, will peace not come to the earth? Or when the Prince of Peace does come, will you be excluded from its blessings? No! Peace is God's gift and Jesus is its bearer!

Then why do the hard work? Why get ready? Because getting ready is part of the blessing, part of the way we embrace the gift. In the process of getting ready for Jesus, we become like Jesus! We become bearers too of God's justice and peace and grace. We become builders too of the kingdom God has promised.

That's why getting ready really does matter.