

## **“The Times They Are a-Changin’”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

December 13, 2020 – Third Sunday of Advent

John 1:6-8, 19-28; Luke 46-55

Once upon a time there was a little, old church out in the countryside, painted white and with a high steeple. The church had not been painted in years, and on all sides of the building, the paint was in bad shape, peeling away and exposing the underlying wood to the elements.

The church’s pastor decided to do something about this paint problem. Knowing that the church was struggling financially, he checked out the Sunday paper’s ads and found a paint sale. Early the next morning, he went into town and bought a gallon of white paint. The pastor returned to his church and began to apply a fresh coat to the old building. By noon, he completed the first side, which was then looking fantastic! But he noticed he had already used half of his paint. He didn't want to run back in town again, and being the creative person that he was, he found a gallon of paint thinner in the shed out back, and began to thin his paint. This worked out well for the thrifty pastor as, indeed, he finished the remaining three sides with his remaining thinned paint.

That night, however, it rained...hard. The next morning, when the pastor stepped outside of the parsonage to admire his work, he saw that the first side was still looking fantastic, but

that the paint on the other three sides, the paint that had been thinned out, had all washed away.

Exasperated, the pastor looked up in sky in anguish and cried out, "O God, whatever shall I do?"

A voice came back from the heavens in reply, saying, "Repaint, and thin no more!"

The call to repent, that is to change in mind, heart, or life's direction, is one of the themes that we hear repeated throughout the season of Advent. It was the message of grasshopper-eating John the Baptist as he cried out in the desert so long ago. And the call for us to change continues to be offered by the prophets living among us today.

One of these is Bob Dylan, who on Monday sold his rights to all 600 of his songs, likely for some amount over \$300,000,000. Oh, the times they are a-changin'! When Bob wrote this particular song in 1963, these hopeful words and a call to change, became an anthem for the Civil Rights Movement. This song could also have been anthem for "Jesus Movement" or a song for the movements of prophets before Jesus and it echoes their messages that God will make the crooked places made straight and will lift up the lowly, that God calls for change and creates change.

Thanks be to God! For our world needs the times to be a-changin', and we all need to turn ourselves to face the things that bring us God's precious gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love.

It is especially good for us to remember this as we move into the busy Christmas season and the world around us shouts for us to embrace values and ways of living that actually rob us of these precious gifts of God.

Here we are less than two weeks before Christmas. Are you ready for the big day? Have you finished your shopping? Have you even started your shopping? Perhaps you started your shopping a couple of months ago in October, when the first of the Christmas ads began rolling on television, and even then, you still have yet to get those last few items before C-Day arrives. Well, my friends, (looking at watch) it's C minus 12 days and counting. No pressure.

But there is pressure, isn't there? Lots of pressure...to buy, buy, buy, and then buy some more. And there's pressure now not just to buy for your family, friends, co-workers, and postal workers, but for the most important person of all in our society: Yourself!

Perhaps you've seen the commercials on TV that show adults becoming children, experiencing child-like Christmas joy again, when they receive the new luxury car with a big red bow on top that they've been wanting to get for themselves. Or maybe you've seen the car commercial that shows two guys discussing

how much money they “saved” buying things on sale for Christmas. One guy proudly shows off the item on which he “saved hundreds”: A giant inflatable snowman that lights up for his kids. The other guy “saved thousands” by buying something even bigger that lights up: a giant new truck for himself. The guy who bought the snowman for his kids frowns and shakes his head, knowing that compared to his neighbor, he’s just a doofus, whereas the one who “saved” thousands by buying a big truck for himself is the ad’s true hero.

At Christmastime in America, we do celebrate many wonderful things, such as giving to others and connecting with family and friends, but the message we so often hear this time of the year is that to really have a special, magical, blessed Christmas season, you have to get stuff for others and for yourself: The right stuff, the best stuff, lots and lots of stuff. Looking for peace? Get some new stuff. Want joy? Get more stuff. Need hope? Find it in stuff. All out of love? Curl up with your stuff.

This message is quite different than the one we celebrate together this morning on the third Sunday of Advent. Today’s reading from the gospel according to Luke offers us a very different take on what brings a person hope, peace, joy, and love. In the reading, we find young Mary teaching us all what truly brings a person goodness and blessing.

She was betrothed to Joseph, and, as was the custom among Jews living in first century CE Palestine, Mary was already considered to belong to his household, as a bride price had

been given by Joseph's family to hers. As was the case in this common arrangement, Mary had no stuff of her own and very little power, being just a young teenaged girl living in a Podunk country territory of a land occupied by an oppressing empire. And yet stuff-less, lowly Mary was then considered to be *avored* by God. This favored one was told by the angel Gabriel that she would bear a son even though she had not yet had a physical relationship with her fiancé Joseph. The favored one who had nothing could have been considered as an adulteress and could have been divorced by Joseph. Even worse, according to the Law of Leviticus (20:10) and Deuteronomy (22:22), she could have been put to death. Mary, who had only her own life and a relationship with Joseph was in danger of losing both if the angel's words came to be; the favor of God could have ruined her life.

And when hearing from the angel of the perilous situation she would find herself in, was Mary quite contrary? On the contrary, Mary was *eager* to participate in God's special plan for her, exclaiming, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." And the miracle of the child growing in her brought her great joy, as she exclaimed to her relative Elizabeth, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (Luke 2:46-49). Mary believed the message of the Lord and celebrated with joy. She recognized the blessing of God upon her and was filled with

love. Even facing an unknown future, filled with difficulties and danger, she found peace. And knowing that her child would bring the blessings of justice and mercy of God to her people, she discovered hope.

Indeed, young Mary offers us an example for finding God's favor and blessing in this crazy world where we're lookin' for love in all the wrong places, pining for peace from things that do not appease, and hoping to find joy in shiny new toys. We need to pay attention to her example today, and to repent, to turn ourselves so that we follow in her path, more than ever as it's not only from retailers' advertisements that we are called to seek these blessings by acquiring more stuff and wealth. This message is shouted at us loudly each day. We hear it even from some who claim to be preachers of the gospel.

Consider the messages of the TV preachers of the so-called prosperity gospel. One of these, Creflo Dollar, has said, "Some people come to me and say, well I came here to get some peace, not money, and I tell them, you *need* money otherwise you *ain't gonna get* no peace." And also "Some people say it's about peace, joy, and love. No! It's about money!" In other words, the acquisition of monetary wealth is more valuable than the acquisition of peace, joy, and love. For Dollar and other preachers of the prosperity gospel, it begins and ends with money. You give them your money, which is like a seed being planted, God grows the money in the ministry (and preachers' pocketbooks), and the original giver of the money can expect to receive a rich monetary blessing by God in return.

This message is pedaled perhaps to perfection by the ever-grinning, Joel Osteen, pastor of Houston's Lakewood Church, one of the largest churches in the country. He states this: "If you are struggling financially, then you have not got the victory;" that "God didn't create you to be average or poor;" and that "It's God's will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty." Yes, Osteen's message is that God wants you to be monetarily rich like he is, and if you're not rich, you're not yet victorious in life; you're just a sad doofus.

Poor, poor Mary. She had no monetary victory, she had no prosperity, she had no stuff. By the values of the prosperity preachers, she was just a loser who was not blessed by God; her humble estate was proof that she was not favored by God and could never really know God's peace, love, or joy. By the values of our society in general, she would have been terribly sad on the day of Christ's birth. Riding to Bethlehem on an old, little grey donkey would have been terribly humiliating. She really deserved to ride in style, like in Creflo's private jet. Giving birth to her child in a soiled and stinking stable, not in a mansion like Joel's, would have been absolutely demeaning. And then laying down her sweet child's head in a manger, a filthy feeding trough? Eww. That's just gross. What a disaster!

Well, thank God for Mary and her humility! For in a world filled with horrible hucksters preaching that finding God's blessing is all about finding the money and gluttonous corporations that gobble us up as we consume a never-ending diet of their stuff

to feel satisfied, we still have a true light: Mary. This scared but trusting, unknowing but eager, jubilant, God-favored girl is our example of how to find true blessing as we move into the Christmas season. She teaches us that lowly lives indeed matter to God; that blessings come by giving to others, regardless of the cost, rather than by gaining at the expense of others; that material riches are by no means a sign of God's favor; and that trusting in God's impossible miracle that her child will bring true justice and mercy to the world can dispel our darkest fears, bring joyous celebration, and lead us to finding true riches beyond measure.

This morning, let us repent. Let us change our ways to be more like the ways of Mary so that we may find ourselves as she was, full of God's grace and joy. Amen.