

SEEING LIFE AS IT SHOULD BE

Sermon, December 11, 2022

Text: Luke 3:1-20

Some of you are old enough to remember the popular Broadway song, "To Dream the Impossible Dream." That song was the most popular song from the 1965 musical "The Man of La Mancha" and is also featured in the 1972 film of the same name starring Peter O'Toole. The script is inspired by Miguel de Cervantes' seventeenth-century masterpiece Don Quixote. It tells the story of the "mad" knight, Don Quixote. The work is not, and does not pretend to be, a faithful rendition of the classic novel; if anything, found the movie version (*which I watched again last week*), to be a bit too dark and depressing ... but it did have its bright spots, including the chart-topping hit of the sixties, "To Dream the Impossible Dream."

The context is Don Quixote saying, "*The mission of each true knight, his duty — nay — his privilege... is*

*To dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe
To bear with unbearable sorrow, to run where the brave dare not go.
To right the unrightable wrong, to love pure and chaste from afar
To try when your arms are too weary to reach the unreachable star.
This is my quest — To follow that star, no matter how hopeless, no matter how far.
To fight for the right without question or pause. to be willing to march into Hell for a heavenly cause.
And I know if I'll only be true to this glorious quest
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm when I'm laid to my rest.
And the world will be better for this that one man scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage to reach the unreachable star."*

Perhaps my favorite quote from "The Man of LaMancha" is from the "mad" knight himself:

"When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams - - this may be madness; to seek treasure where there is only trash. Too much sanity may be madness! And maddest of all - to see life as it is and not as it should be." (emphasis added – slc)

Was John the Baptist a madman? After all, as Matthew's account tells us, he's wearing camel's hair clothing (*a suit by Camel Klein*), he's living in the desert, he has a diet of locusts and honey, and at first glance he seems to be preaching with almost vitriolic anger and passion. But I don't think so; I don't think he's mad. I think John the Baptist saw life as it should be, and refused to settle for life as it is. More properly, I believe this prophet was full of Advent hope, and he saw life as it *will* be ... and called the people to live accordingly, in anticipation of this glorious hope.

John the Baptist arrives on the scene with what appear to be harsh words of judgment. We are told John said to the crowds coming out, "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?*" It has always bemused me that this comes up as a lectionary reading during Advent ... here we are, two weeks from Christmas, and we read of a preacher calling his congregation a brood of vipers ... which doesn't seem to be the best way to get people in a Christmassy mood. But I'm convinced the purpose of John's words is not so much to indict, as it is to invite ... to invite people to get ready to receive a Savior who will help them see life as it should be, and to live life as it should be lived. However, even though he was fiery and feisty and provocative and his words were fiery and feisty and full of the language of judgment, John's message really was a message of uplifting hope and optimism. John wasn't wringing his hands and cynically proclaiming, "*Oh, how awful. Look what this world is coming to.*" His message was an optimistic, "*Oh how wonderful! Look what (or Who) is coming to this world!*" His news IS good news. That is why we light the candle of Joy this morning. John, in his unique way, had a joyful message of Hope and Love. Joyful John is saying there is hope for us; because of Who is coming into this world, we can *change*. Because of Who is coming into this world, we can be *different*. Because of Who is coming into this world, we can be *better* ... better than we ever thought possible. And that is good news!

To be clear, though, at the heart of John's hopeful message is the difficult word "repentance" ... that word that means not only being sorry for our sins, but being sorry enough to QUIT! Genuine repentance is not about sowing your wild oats for six days a week then on the seventh day coming to church to pray

for a crop failure. John says, in so many words, *"Don't just talk the talk, walk the walk! Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. God is interested in your fruits, not your roots!"*

The crowds really came out, and many responded. I think the message of judgment has appeal because if we're honest, we know we deserve it. We know we don't measure up to our own expectations, let alone God's. So, *"Preach it, brother John. We know we don't measure up. We know our ways have been crooked, we know we have valley size gaps that need to be filled, we know we have mountainous difficulties that need to be leveled. We know the mistakes we have made. We know we've hurt people we love, we ache because of it."* Yes, we are strangely drawn to someone who will tell it like it is, much as it might hurt, and we would love to have a chance to get it straight. *"Tell us, John ... what should we do?"*

This is what these people in Luke do. They didn't argue or protest their innocence. They simply asked John, *"What should we do?"* That is what they really wanted to know, and that is what we really want to know. We know what we have done! What we don't always know is what we should do about it. To the people's question, John simply replied, *"Whoever has two tunics should share with anyone who has none. Those who have food should share it with those who don't. Tax collectors should not cheat. Soldiers should not bully people. And be content with your wages."* Paraphrased, *"if you have wealth, share it; if you are in a position of trust, honor it; if you have power, don't abuse it."* These prescriptions are striking in their obvious simplicity. John is not telling these people things they did not know. He is not asking them to do anything heroic. He is simply telling them to do the right thing as they have opportunity, beginning right now ... which, come to think of it, simply doing the right thing is becoming increasingly heroic these days; but that's almost another sermon. My take on this is that John tells them in so many words to stop thinking so much and just take ordinary steps to live life as it should be lived, to do what they know to be right, starting right now. Take steps to make the crooked straight, the rough places smooth, and to be on the level. To John's list we could add other things we know to be right, things we know we ought to do. *"Treat those close to you with more respect and love. Honor your commitments. Stop lying. Stop cheating. Don't complain so much. (Teddy Roosevelt: "Complaining about a problem without posing a solution is called Whining.") Serve and share where and when you are able."*

Doing the right thing isn't really all that complicated. But it CAN be hard. Or, as someone else put it, doing the right thing is simple, but it isn't always easy. More often than not, the problem isn't not knowing what we ought to do. The problem isn't even wanting to do what we know we ought to do. The problem is actually carrying through and DOING it, taking the risk and making the effort and mustering the courage to do what we know to be right. For various reasons what we know is the right thing to do may just be too daunting, too frightening, too intimidating; we think it's going to take more energy and resolve and effort than we think we can give. We need help. But we really don't discover we need help until we actually make the sincere effort to actually do what is right. We find we need help making the crooked straight. We need help smoothing out the rough places of our lives. We need help filling the huge gaps of need. We need help raising our children well, we need help setting a higher tone at the office, we need help honoring our commitments ... in short, we need help being and doing right.

And the one crying in the wilderness says, *"That's RIGHT! Now you are ready for Christmas! Now you are ready for a Savior."* The only way to get our lives and our souls and our world straightened out is to turn to the coming Savior, receive Him into our hearts, and then with His help try to do the right thing and the true thing and the responsible thing and the admirable thing and then watch Him go to work with us filling in the valleys, leveling the mountains and the hills, straightening the crooked, smoothing out the rough places. *"Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain."* Note that every verb in that passage is in the passive voice, not the imperative ... which implies this work WILL be done. *"Every valley SHALL be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain."* Yes, we are to do what we can to "prepare the way," but ultimately, this leveling, beautifying work of redemption will be the Lord's doing! It is God Who will ultimately see to it that the crooked ways will be made straight. He will set things right, He will finish this; as mentioned two weeks ago, the Advent hope is that God will finish what He started ... that is true for you and me and it is true for all creation. As Paul wrote to the Philippians *"I am confident of this, that the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."*

"Too much sanity may be madness. And maddest of all, to see life as it is and not as it should be." John invites all of us to see life as it should be, to see life as it WILL be, because of the coming Savior ... and go on to live in the present accordingly.