

Sermon Advent 2C
Luke 3:1-5
December 9, 2018

**Its inspirational tagline was first found in a 1902 article
In a Swedish literature journal.**

**The first structured narrative came in a sermon in 1906,
And was featured heavily in Sunday School publication
That same year.**

**It came into its final and most well-known form
In 1930 when published by Platt & Munk,
And in 2007, the National Education Association
Listed it as one of the Top 100 Books for Children.**

**A favorite in my home growing up,
A story that has taught the value of optimism and hard work
To generations of children across the country,
“The Little Engine That Could” is the quintessential tale
That teaches us that anything is possible
When we set our minds to it,
And that every obstacle is surmountable
With diligent and steady effort.**

**The small, seemingly insufficient locomotive
Puffs up the hill chanting “I think I can...I think I can”
And sails down the other side with a congratulatory
“I thought I could...I thought I could!”**

**Whether it is a classic underdog sports victory film,
A rags-to-riches autobiography or anything in between,
We have come to cherish stories in which
That which was not expected to win or succeed
Does just that in the end.**

**We cherish those stories because we long for it to happen us.
We want to know that our optimism and hard work will pay off.
That our work, blood, sweat, tears,
Long shifted, penny-pinching, coupon-cutting days
Will continue to chug up the grade
Until we reach the top and can victoriously proclaim
That thought...that we knew we could.**

**And for the most part, we'd be right.
That's the way things are set up anyway:
Work hard enough and enjoy success.
Put your mind to it and accomplish anything.
Keep optimistic and no quantity of naysaying,
Or barriers, or inequalities will keep you down.**

**"If I keep thinking I can for long enough,
Eventually I'll know that I could."**

**But what about those moments when "I think I can..."
Turns into "I think I will no matter what or who it costs?"
When the age-old problems of greed and selfish gain
Turn our steady chugging into thoughtless bulldozing?**

**Or those moments when our lives fall apart?
The hill becomes so steep that all traction is lost?
That our steam and optimism run out?**

**Whether we are forcing our way up to the top
Or are sliding backwards in lost hope,
Comes a voice in the wilderness,
A voice echoing through regions around the Jordan
A voice echoing through generations of time,
A voice calling for repentance, calling for preparation.**

After firmly planting his account
In the annals of Grecco-Roman history,
After naming the civil and religious authorities of the day
Thus calling into the limelight the systems of power
In which they and now we participate,
Luke's wilderness preacher calls for repentance.

For a great turning-around in which we stop thinking
That we are the ones who can equalize the playing field,
That we are the ones who can straighten the crooked,
And that we are the ones who can smoothen the way,
Because history and our present clearly prove
That we are not really good at it.

John's call to repentance is having second-thoughts about "I can,"
And admitting to ourselves and to our God that "I can't."

We can't live on our own devices,
We can't fully succeed in working for justice and peace,
Without worrying what we might lose.
We can't offer our whole lives to service
Without worrying about what we'll have left.
We can't save ourselves
Our set ourselves free from that which binds us.

And just as the hardened, self-sufficient scales begin
To fall off our eyes, a word of hope and forgiveness,
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
And all flesh will see the salvation of God."

Like its sister season of Lent, Advent is time for us to get ready.
To get ready for the light of Christ that breaks into
The dark places of the world and in our lives.

**A time for us to remember and experience again
The purifying and refining waters of baptism
That flood over our foreheads.**

**Water that drowns our self-made, "I think I can" identities,
And gives life to new "God can" identities.**

**God can.
God has.
God always will.**

**God made flesh has come and is coming into the world
To refine our lives until God's own reflection is seen in them.**

**In our varied giftedness we bear Christ into the world,
So that that reflection is seen by others
And they too might come to know the love and salvation
Prepared for them.**

**We don't live in a perfect world.
There are still wars. There are still diseases.
There are still rough roads to travel.**

**Our lives may not be what we would like them to be.
There are inequities between people.
There are still walls being built between cultures.**

**We look around at the world and wonder
Where God's salvation really is
Nothing seems to have changed.**

But we don't look to the world to see God's salvation,

We look to Jesus:

Jesus present in Scriptures,

Jesus in the manger,

Jesus on the cross,

Jesus present in the sacraments,

Jesus present in our coming together in his name,

Jesus present in the lives of his followers,

Jesus present and eating with sinners.

We see Jesus' presence in the person next to us in the pew,

In the person with different color skin,

In the person living on the street corner,

In the person living with chronic or hidden illnesses,

In the young, in the old, the wealthy and the poor.

And perhaps when we begin to see Jesus in each other,

More of the world might have a glimpse of God's salvation.

I think we can.

I think we can.

Amen.