

“Prepared for Grace”

Advent II

Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

December 9, 2018

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent II, December 9, 2018, dedicated to our amazing and graceful staff and membership, to Cameron Elizabeth Merrill on her baptismal day, to David and Britanie as they join First Church today and to my grandsons Benton and Rylan Ahrens who bring me joy every day and always to the glory of God!

“Prepared for Grace”

Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Grace is defined in Christian faith as “the free and unmerited favor of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings.” Grace can mean something as broad as describing the whole of God’s activity toward humanity or as narrow as describing one singular act or segment of that God’s embrace and touch in one individual life or place or time. But, the one consistent definition describes grace as unmerited favor of God toward us. Along with unmerited. It is unexpected. It is undeserved by the recipient. Most of all, it is miraculous. There is really no better season to explore grace than the Advent season as we look for the signs of God’s coming as a newborn infant.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Move out of the way “Helicopter Parents Here Comes the Bulldozer,” read the headline several years ago. That’s right, Helicopter Parents swooping in to take care of their children’s troubles is OLD NEWS. Bulldozering is the new style of parental operation.

Sharon Hargrave is the Director of the Boone Center for the Family at Pepperdine University, she describes the ‘bulldozer parent’ as being the following:

A bulldozer parent says I’m going to move everything out of the way so my child doesn’t have to experience anything hard or difficult. For example, say I hear there is a mean first grade teacher and a “good” first grade teacher. I’m up at the school making sure that my child gets the positive teacher.

(Just a minute – If going in to talk with school officials about the best possible match for a teacher with my child is the definition of a Bulldozer Parent – than I was a Bulldozer long before it was a “thing.” Anyway... back to her definition).

The idea is that we don't want our children to experience anything too difficult or negative, so we remove any obstacle they might face to keep them from having to deal with difficult issues.

Eventually what happens is we increase anxiety in our children because they have never experienced solving a problem on their own and lack the confidence in their ability to do so. When an issue is sprung on them – which it will – they can't figure out what to do because they are used to the parent always solving the problem for them. (Found in N-Gen Blog, January 22, 2015).

Who knew that our God was a bulldozer parent? Apparently, Luke knew and Isaiah knew. “A voice cries in the wilderness – Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill made low, the crooked shall be straightened, the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

If that is not a Bulldozer Parent as work on the contours of the terrain laid out for God's son, I don't know what else you can call it. I call it – “Plowing a way to paradise to prepare for the coming of the Son of God into this world.” But, is it graceful to do this? But, what about the child? How does he or she do when all the world has been plowed for him or her? In the case of Jesus, the child turned out just fine. Let's talk about the human variety of Bulldozing Parents in another setting.

Into this newly plowed terrain we have a child being born in this season. He will rise to face all things and overcome all things. The effects of a bulldozer parent do not destroy our Messiah's ego or his engagement with life and people. In fact, behind the dozer comes grace. Ironic isn't it? The child turns out fine – defining what it means to graciously tend to God's people on earth.

Essentially what God does is prepare a way for grace. Malachi is saying the same thing. God sends the messenger ahead to prepare the way of the Lord. He purifies. He refines. He gets things ready for the what is coming next.

Paul continues this theme of preparation in the opening of his letter to the church at Philippi. He wants people in the church to be joyful and open their hearts to Christ who is coming into the world. He wants their joy to translate into increased love; mutual commitment to God and one another, a readiness to allow new things to spring forth in their lives and finally, an awareness of what is best for them – what really matters.

Grace arrives. When the ground is plowing and the path is clear – grace arrives. Grace is unexpected. Grace is often overwhelming. Grace shows up in the night when we are half awake. Grace comes at daybreak or in the morning, when we are clinging to our coffee cup and can barely see or talk. Grace

holds our face in her hands and speaks love directly to us. Grace smiles when we have been swept away by our own sadness and tells us – with words or a feeling – that everything will be alright. Grace brings laughter to our hardening heart; joy to our beguiling grumpiness; peace to our troubled and disturbed “Hum-Bug-like” manner.

Grace comes in unexpected places; To unsuspecting people in unrelenting times.

The best you and I can do to prepare for grace is to live lives of gratitude. Gratitude is not a luxury for believers only; it is an absolute necessity in today’s world. When we fail to live lives of gratitude, we open the door for a poisonous climate of ingratitude and thankless living.

Grateful living opens the door for grace’s arrival. It is the joy of grateful living that Paul addresses in his first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 5:12-22. Here he gives us 16 measures and guides to a life of gratitude. They include being at peace with one another and among ourselves; encouraging the faint-hearted; holding in high esteem and in love for all who work among us; helping the weak and being patient with all who are weak; never repaying evil for evil; always seeking to do good for one another; always rejoicing; giving thanks in all circumstances; not quenching the Spirit of God, never

despising the words of the prophets; holding fast to what is good and abstaining from every form of evil.

Let's take another look at our Bulldozer Parent, God Almighty, the maker of Heaven and Earth and all that was and is and will become. As God clears the path for the Messiah, God is making it easy for us to follow. The ease is not meant to take away our struggle. It is meant to lessen the strain of our living grace-filled lives. By plowing a path to paradise for Jesus and all of us, God is actually clearing the way for us to serve others with joyful hearts.

Yesterday I was a witness to a staff and a community of grace-filled people. As I returned from the frozen graveside of Nancy Jeffrey at Greenlawn with her family of 60 in a caravan of four huge limousines, we came to the corner of Cleveland and Broad Streets. There we were met by men parking cars in the west lot bundled in parkas and scarves. Thank you. Then we exited at the Education wing doors and met Mark Williams and his staff in the Nursery welcoming the Jeffrey children with smiles and open arms. Thank you. We were also greeted by the Deacons with smiles and open arms and clear directions where to go for people who did not know our building. Thank you. The same was true in the parlor, the sanctuary, and at every door where people were arriving – all 700 strong to remember Nancy Jeffrey with love and thanksgiving. Thank

you. I am especially thankful for Rev. Emily Corzine, Kevin Jones and the choir, Mark Williams, Mark Dahnke, Gary Leidheiser and the House and Grounds crew, Janet Newcity and the Amazing Deacons of First Church, all the extra volunteers and Sharon Leidheiser, Marty Worth, and Amy Wagner, Tom Worley who cleaned up the park for the Jeffrey family to walk through and the Bereavement Team who led us through not a week in which had two major memorial services with over 1100 people in worship – for Mary Weaver on Sunday afternoon last week and Nancy Jeffrey on Saturday this week. (and I would add- thank you for all who made last week's extravagant welcome happen so beautifully as well!).

All who entered our doors to worship were greeted with gracious greeters, embraced with genuine love and kindness and held in esteem as guests in our cathedral of grace. Many of you entered to serve (if you even made it in the doors from the frozen land outside!) and then you served gracefully. You prepared your hearts and then you prepared God's cathedral of grace to welcome all who came through our doors. You were the bulldozers who cleared the path of hospitality and in the trying and hard times of grief for yourselves and others, you brought love to life here. **Thank you.**

Some of you may say this is not a sermon. This is an oral thank you note. Write it. Send it. Don't waste the sermonic

moment on specific thanks. You missed some people. How could you forget.....? To you I also say, “Thank you.” I am grateful for skeptics and critics; observers or what is right and wrong and analysts who bring to bear their deep insights on how we can do things better or differently. You see, the Bulldozer levels all the field.

It is my hope and prayer that we breathe deep and give thanks for the amazing spirit of love which overflows here. Let us never take it for granted. This grace we feel and share is a gift from God. We should never tire of feeling and giving grace. We should never tire of preparing for and receiving grace. We should know it our greatest gift – which is humbly given by God to all of us in the form of a baby born in a barn; laid in a feed trough for cows and sheep; and raised by a teenage mother and her wood-carving husband. If God had not been a Bulldozer Parent, Jesus never would have stood a chance.

Remembering that **Grace comes in unexpected places; To unsuspecting people in unrelenting times.** let us join with Jesus’ cousin John today and declare that no less than the Salvation of God is coming! Let us prepare a way for Grace to enter our lives this season! Be open and Be ready. And may you do by living grace-filled and grateful lives. Amen.

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