

**Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday December 6, 2009**

***Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6***

**‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord’. These words first were spoken by the prophet Isaiah to begin to prepare the Israelite people to understand that God had a promising vision for their future.**

**Much, much later, in New Testament times, three decades into the lives of John and Jesus, John the Baptist included Isaiah’s words in his call to repentance, inviting his hearers to ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’.**

**I found that the musical Godspel made these words even more memorable—not only being set to music, but also because of the contexts in which I heard them sung. One such moment took place in seminary, during our worship class in which we were assigned to prepare and share a call to worship with the class. My friend Steve, a former actor, sang that line from Godspel as his call to worship... ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord’. Set to music, these prophetic words are deeply poignant.**

**That line from scripture returns to us with every Advent season. And in this past week, the first of this Advent season, that same friend, Steve, from seminary, allowed my friend Justin and me to share in an experience which brought the main themes of Advent—preparation and waiting and holy expectancy into focus, drawing us closer to one another, to God, and to a deeper, more meaningful understanding of Advent. P. 1**

**Eighteen years ago, Steve, Justin, and I met as seminary classmates, and God gifted the three of us with a deep bond of spiritual friendship. We spent seven years in seminary together, graduating at last in the Spring of 1998. Before and after graduation, our friendship has seen us through marriages, births, deaths, traumatic illnesses, ordinations, job changes, and moves—including Steve’s family’s to Sandpoint, Idaho five years ago. From seminary onward, the three of us and our families have delighted in and depended on one another so much and so often, that we have come to believe that God called us together in preparation for the challenges our lives would present—and as a reminder that God would be with us in the midst of each event and transition.**

**We had gone to seminary in hopes that we could prepare the way of the Lord in our own lives, and in the lives of those whom we would serve in pastoral ministry. We came out of seminary with a gift of spiritual companionship through which God was preparing us for the multitude of joys and challenges which lay ahead.**

**About six years ago, Steve started having grand mal seizures. While these could be minimized with medication, he continued to have what are called ‘breakthrough seizures’, which are of shorter duration and less severe, but which have increasingly interfered with his work as a pastor and chaplain, and with his responsibilities as a husband and father of two young girls. Numerous doctors in California, Idaho, and Washington have been consulted, all manner of medical tests have been run, P. 2**

**the results studied, opinions rendered, options described. All of these have been combined with the prayers of many individuals and congregations for Steve to find relief from the seizures and healing from the epilepsy. In retrospect, all of these prayers and each physician's procedure has been a part of a long journey of preparation for the events of this past week.**

**Perhaps that is one of the purposes for us to discover in the practice of observing Advent--to learn to recognize the people and the events in our lives as a part of God's preparation of us for those events which lie ahead on our life journeys. For God knows the kinds of people, experiences, and resources that we each will need along the courses of our lives, and may well be offering us tools, maps, and companions to assist us on the road ahead. As we prepare the way of the Lord, God is preparing the way for us.**

**For over two years now, Steve's doctors have been discussing the option of brain surgery with him and his wife Elizabeth. I was actually present the first time Steve's neurologist raised the topic and, while it scared us, it seemed so remote that it didn't seem like something that would ever come to pass. But as the months went by, there were more seizures, more compromises that had to be made in Steve's life as a result; there were more doctors and more tests. As time passed, the tests became more than diagnostic tools, they were an integral part of preparing Steve for brain surgery. Each series of tests was more refined, more specifically equipped to determine the exact P. 3**

areas of the brain which were causing the seizures. And, with each set of tests, the rest of us became that much more prepared for the inevitability that Steve would need to undergo brain surgery to remove the areas of his brain which were, for some reason, irreparably damaged. As the tests became more focused and the plans became more definite, the prayers that surrounded Steve and Elizabeth and their family became more specific, more intense, and more widespread. And, at last, the date was set—for this past Thursday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>. Surgery would take place at the University of Washington in Seattle, over 350 miles from Steve's home.

Steve and Elizabeth arrived at in Seattle last Monday night, and he went through two full days of preparation and testing on Tuesday and Wednesday. Justin and I arrived on Wednesday night, in time to spend an hour or so with Steve and Elizabeth. It was a time for laughter and tears, for hugs and prayers—a last part of the preparation for the coming surgery. What had once seemed to be such a remote possibility, or a 'worst-case-scenario' option, had become our present reality—and by Wednesday night, we were all 'ready' for the surgery that could restore Steve's health and quality of life.

Looking back over years of friendship, years of seizures, years of tests, and months of pre-operative evaluations, we could all see clearly the hand of God guiding us toward and preparing us for this moment in time. Before we knew it, Thursday had dawned and we were all at the hospital for Steve's 9:00 am check-in. Fairly quickly, Steve and Elizabeth were whisked away for some last pre-op procedures.

Surgery was scheduled to begin at 11:00 a.m. Justin and I were settled in the surgical waiting room waiting for Elizabeth's return. Eleven o'clock came and went. So did twelve o'clock. By one o'clock, we were becoming somewhat frantic, but all we could do was wait and pray. Whatever was going on was out of our hands—and we had to place our trust firmly in God's hands. At last Elizabeth appeared, saying that the surgery in the OR that Steve would be in was taking far longer than expected and that it would be a while yet before Steve would be taken in. Elizabeth and I had some lunch, and then she was allowed to go back and be with Steve until they took him to the OR. She was back with us at 2:45, saying that he had gone into the operating room. It wasn't until later on that we learned that even in the OR there had been more preparation necessary, and that surgery actually hadn't begun until 4:00 p.m. So, at just about the time we had expected surgery to be finished, it was really just beginning. More waiting, more prayer and, yes, more worry. A couple of updates phoned from the OR helped us through, it was good to know that things were going as planned. About 11:15 we heard that he was going to the recovery room. After that, another CT scan would be needed. After 15 hours in that waiting room, Justin and I had seen families come in, wait, receive good news, and move on. The three of us were the last ones there when a nurse came to get us at 1:00 in the morning. We got to spend about 45 minutes in the ICU with a very groggy Steve, his head wrapped in a turban of bandages. He was able to talk to us a bit, and we could see glimpses of his unique personality and sense of humor. P. 5

Going back to the hotel for a few hours of rest, I felt relieved that Goal #1 had been achieved—Steve had survived the surgery! A significant portion of his brain had been removed, but he was alive. And he was talking and moving—and it looked like Goal #2 might have been achieved as well—that Steve was still *Steve*. This was confirmed the next morning as, between bouts of sleep, and in the midst of significant pain, Steve showed flashes of the insight and the humor for which he is known. We saw him sit up in a chair, heard him ask questions, and at 3:00, we hugged him and Elizabeth goodbye and we headed back to L.A., grateful to God that Steve’s body is alive and his mind intact.

There is more waiting yet to be done. It may be months before we can be certain that the seizures are gone. Steve will continue on anti-seizure medication, he will continue to have tests, and in the absence of seizure activity, the meds will be gradually reduced over time until, hopefully, he will be declared free of the epilepsy and need for further treatment. And while that was the intent of the entire period of preparation and of the surgery, for now it seems to be enough of a gift that he is alive, that his personality was not altered, and that things like language, motor skills, and vision remain intact and functioning well. It feels like a great and wonderful gift to be able to thank God that the Steve we knew on Wednesday is still the Steve we know on Friday—and that we still have a great deal of hope that Steve will emerge from this ordeal seizure free.

Yesterday, we’re told, he was able to walk around and to eat. What a miracle. P. 6

Perhaps that is another of the purposes for us to discover in the practice of observing Advent--to learn to recognize and give thanks for all the blessings which we already have, in addition to those for which we prepare and pray and wait. Advent can teach us not only to learn to prepare for and wait for God's presence, but also to recognize that God is present within the preparation and the waiting. As we await the coming of the Lord, God is already waiting for us.

Spending all those concentrated hours in the hospital, we felt as if we had entered into some kind of time warp. Some of the time—particularly that which we spent in Steve's presence—sped quickly by. More of the time—especially the periods of waiting when we were unsure as to what was going on—dragged on and on, minutes feeling like hours.

We took turns leaving the room to get something to eat or to take brief walks, so that one of us would be present should a call about Steve come into the waiting room desk.

We occasionally dozed off for a bit, sometimes read, spent time chatting, as well as sitting in silent prayer and companionship. We were waiting for news. We were waiting to be assured that Steve had come through the surgery in good form. We were waiting for God's response to our prayers. On the flight home, as Justin and I were looking out the windows at the bright lights of Los Angeles, it occurred to me that God had been waiting with us—not waiting, as we were, for news of the outcome of surgery—but waiting with us as a comforting presence—as Justin and I were attempting to do for Elizabeth and for Steve. While we were waiting for God, God was waiting with us. P. 7

**I must admit, that there was fear in our time of waiting. But there was also a powerful sense of holy expectancy, of hope that this surgery would be healing and life-giving. For we know, deep in our hearts, that it was God who created Steve, it was God who gave him his wonderful sense of humor, his deep and inclusive faith, his sensitivity and compassion, and his pure joy in all areas of life. We know that God loves Steve even more than we do, and that God surely wants the very best for Steve. And so, God was present in that waiting room, having guided us through the times of preparation, and we trusted that God would be with Steve and with us, whatever surgery's outcome.**

**Perhaps this is the third gift of Advent—along with the practices of preparation and waiting, as well as the expression of gratitude—the light of holy expectancy, the hope that God's presence offers and illuminates.**

**Most often, our practices of worship and prayer during Advent focus on the coming of the Christ Child, the birthing of something new in our own lives of faith, and the vision of Christ's promised return. We prepare and wait for these remembrances and hopes and visions to come to fruition in our own lives. But perhaps the message deep within today's passages of prophecy and prediction is that *our* lives are preparation for journeys which will take us *to* God—the God who is waiting for us, the God who prepares a place for us, the God who wants to welcome us into healing and wholeness, the same God who has prepared the table and waits for us to gather there. Amen. P. 8**

**Malachi 3:1-4**

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight--indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

**Luke 3:1-6**

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"