

**Resisting Fast Forward**  
**Preached by**  
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**December 9, 2018**  
**Second Sunday of Advent**

**For Reflection:** *Don't blame the messenger because the message is unpleasant.* Ubiquitous

**Epistle Reading:** Philippians 1:3-11 (adapted)

We thank God, every time we think of Christians in the world for their living and sharing of the gospel. We are confident that the ones who do good work will find their work fulfilled in its promise by the power of God through Christ Jesus.

It is right for us to think this way about one another, because we hold one another and one another's faithful work in prayer. This is our prayer: that our love may overflow more and more with knowledge and understanding, so that together, our lives and ministry might be found an acceptable and pleasing offering to God. Amen.

**Gospel Reading:** 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.'"

**Sermon: Resisting "Fast Forward"**

Whenever I watch something "on demand," before anything else happens an annoying message appears: "Fast forward and other functionalities may not be available during this program." What's annoying about it? Well, first, if the message appears fast forward *isn't* available, so they should just say that. Second, "functionality" isn't a word. But the most annoying thing is that fast forward isn't available. I can't zip through ads, public service announcements or those charitable presentations that tell me I can save the world a piece at a time for only \$19.99 per month, a mere \$0.67 per day. I do get a lot of household tasks done in those moments, however.

There are a lot of things most of us want to fast forward through: When we have a chronic pain or any kind of health condition requiring PT or surgery, we are reasonably secure in the sense that we are going to feel better at the end of the journey but really want to skip right to the end—even though doing so is likely to mean a less effective healing experience or having only a temporary fix.

At different times in our lives, we may want to skip right from slight attraction to long-term commitment; we may look forward to the days when diapers are behind us; getting up at 5:00AM or staying up all night with a sick child, the days beyond PTA bake sales, scout meetings and swim meets; or we may be looking beyond the days of struggling to make ends meet with more secure finances that also provide for luxury. When those future times arrive, few have no sense of nostalgia for those days, the relationships, the closeness, the sense of accomplishment, even the weariness that comes from a job well done, whether that "job" was parenting, a vocation, caring for friends or serving the community. For

those who manage to avoid challenging days, they can experience a lack of richness or depth to their days.

Of course the desire to fast forward through uncomfortable challenging moments or experiences isn't limited to the details of daily living. We are becoming increasingly adept at fast forwarding through our spiritual lives. To be frank, most of us would like to fast forward right through Advent to Christmas and make it a four week-long children's story, with only happy Christmas carols. We don't want to deal with John the Baptist, although this year's lectionary does spare us from being called a "brood of vipers," also known as a nest of snakes. Can't we just get to the baby?

Now, to the dismay of most liturgical purists, I am not remotely one. Sometimes I follow the lectionary, and sometimes, as I did often this fall, I departed from it in order to seek a Word for vital things in the life of our congregation or the world which needed to be addressed. Although I did not do so this morning, I usually include at least one Christmas carol in each Advent worship service because I don't think ignoring where people are is helpful. We always have one foot in earth's human reign and another in God's reign. To pretend otherwise is foolish.

At the same time, it is my role to help us tune ourselves to the rhythm of God's Word as it was and continues to be revealed and to help us all strengthen our spiritual lives and experience God's presence and purpose. That means not allowing us to fast forward through these days with a frantic rush to the manger.

God sent John the Baptist as a messenger before Jesus' ministry was revealed. Obviously, God knew something we don't or would rather forget. We cannot experience forgiveness, redemption, love or transformation without acknowledging, not just in our heads, but in our practice, that we need those things; that we are not complete in and of ourselves; that we do not have the power to heal ourselves.

It should come as no surprise to anyone that right after feedback on hymn selection, the most frequent commentary offered about worship is in regard to the prayer of confession. Yes, there a few who find it a spiritually refreshing, yes, refreshing, encounter with their own humanity and with God. There are some who suspect I have placed a listening device in their living rooms.

But most would like us to skip over that part of worship entirely. "It's so negative." Others think we should confess to anything but something called "sin." Most, either consciously or unconsciously, want to fast forward through any thought of repentance – admitting we have fallen short of God's goals for us, asking forgiveness, and pledging with sincerity to turn a new way. Can't we just announce we are forgiven without dealing with the messy details of what we might need to do to ready ourselves to truly receive God's gift of forgiveness?<sup>1</sup>

My own practice for writing our weekly prayers of confession – and yes, like all the other parts of worship, I write them. They don't come out of a book or from the Internet. My own practice is to avoid some of the traditional ones, because like so many things, they can become rote and we fail to find ourselves in them. My own practice is to anchor the confession in elements of the week's worship and the Word from God as it comes to us on any given Sunday.

I don't use the word "sin" often, not because I don't think it applies, but because I am aware that people can often stop listening when they get caught on a word like that and so stop participating in this element of worship in any meaningful way for their own lives. The issue is not to provide wiggle room so that we don't feel we have any need or thing to confess, but the goal is to invite, help, *require us* to hold ourselves accountable for the ways we disrupt that fabric of relationships with our God and one another, rather than paralyzing ourselves with a fatalistic guilt, that does not leave us the spirit to go a new way.

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<sup>1</sup>Curiously, the most frequent mention of "sin", the harshest and most inflexible language I have seen in prayers of confession in our own tradition come on Youth Sunday – it is a developmental stage, but on that day I hear more positive comment about prayers of confession than any other.

Those attempts to avoid, deny or fast forward are consistent with the rampant cultural practice of responding to challenges with comments like, "Mistakes were made," or "I am sorry if you were offended by my innocent words, actions, etc.,"—the increasingly creative non-apology apologies.

While I grant that in a world of increasing sensitivity, sometimes integrity requires a creative response because we cannot possibly keep up or managing all the social allergies people have to comments, actions and practice or even the simple speaking of truth, none of us can argue the non-apology apology is improving our civic lives. Simply being a cultural practice is not an excuse for incorporating unhealthy spirituality into our lives.

We are human. We fail. We sin. We fall short of God's, our neighbors' and our own expectations of ourselves. A healthy spirituality acknowledges those things and makes room for growth, healing, and reconciliation. Suppressing our awareness and acceptance of that only leads to a corrosion of our souls from the inside out.

With that in mind, we might consider the weekly prayer of confession, we might consider this season of Advent opening with proclamation of end times and a messenger to prepare the way for the One who is to come as our spiritual PT. We might want to fast forward through these days, but by doing so we deprive ourselves of a genuine encounter with One who loves us beyond reason with a love we do not have to earn, even if we could. By resisting "fast forward," we open ourselves to wonders we can only imagine but never truly prepare ourselves for by ourselves. By resisting "fast forward" we can make these days, not days of darkness and dread, but ones of heightened anticipation for what is yet to be. May it be so for each one of us and all of us in this season.

### **Prayers for Others and Ourselves**

Compassionate God: As we enter into the final days of preparation for the coming of your Son, we pray that we might keep a holy watch

that our eyes remain open to the need around us

that our responses remain generous

that we return impatience in driving and shopping with smiles and good will

that we take time to listen to the fears and hopes of those around us

that our gratitude for what we have and what we are about to receive is  
expressed in prayers and service

with the sick and the mourning, the hungry and the lonely, the storm and fire battered  
and the war ravaged

in the days ahead as we act with mercy and kindness, we pray, too, for safe travels, healthy and reconciled relationships, so that the joy that is possible with you might be born again in our hearts this year.

We pray in the name of the one who taught us to pray together

The Lord's Prayer