

December 5, 2021
Second Sunday of Advent

Meditation: "In Plane View"

The other day I was in Ailsa Craig to talk with some of the leaders of the United Church there about future options, or at least that was what I was asked to talk with them about. Funny thing. Ailsa Craig is a three-point charge, and only representatives of the church in Ailsa Craig were present. The more I listened, the more it became clear that none of the three congregations is talking with the other two about their plans for the future.

I was thinking about how entrenched we become over time: entrenched in our ways of thinking, our way of being, and in our habits. This holds true not only for us as individuals, but also for the church, I mean the body of Christ, and it's local chapter. We get accustomed to certain ways of thinking. We believe certain things about God; about who in our congregation should do what; about how and where we worship; about who we are aligned with; about how we are the body of Christ in our community; and we never question those things. It could be intellectual laziness, but I think there is more to it than that. I think we, as a body, get so entrenched into ways of thinking and being that we can't imagine other ways of thinking and being.

Now, when I think of being entrenched, I think of my grandfather, on the fields in Ypres in France. Bullets were flying and it didn't take long for someone to realize that the small depression next to the small rise offered some little bit of safety, and before long, trenches were dug, and the soil that was excavated was tossed up onto the small rise, creating a mountain out of a molehill, and a valley out of a depression.

For us, we sometimes make mountains out of molehills, and valleys of despair out of the minor potholes in the road of life. The mountains get so big, at least in our minds, that we can't imagine overcoming them. We learn to live with them as a given, even though we created them in the first place. We get stuck in a rut, as the saying goes.

I think that often the reason we dig the trenches and build up the hills is related to fear, as it was in my grandfather's case. In his case it was fear of being shot and killed. For us, that fear is often fear of the unknown. We seek security in predictability, so we throw up walls against anything that would threaten predictability. The problem is that life is unpredictable. If we isolate ourselves from what is going on around us; if we become out of touch with the world around us; if we can no longer see the world as others see it, we are in trouble.

Has anyone ever seen the Road Runner cartoons? Remember poor Wile E. Coyote? He lived his entire life in pursuit of the bird he could never catch. I remember one episode where he was up high, overlooking the road and he waited for the bird to come racing up the road in the valley below, and at precisely the right moment, he rolled a large boulder down the hill. The boulder was supposed to kill the bird, but the bird sped up and the boulder missed. Wile E. went down the hill to the road below and watched up the road as his prey sped away. In the meantime, the boulder rolled up a hill on the other side of the road and then back down that hill and ran over Wile E., then it rolled up the first hill, and then back down the first hill, and ran over Wile E. again, continuing several times. Sometimes when we live in a trench we are like that boulder; we never get up enough momentum to get out of the trench, and so we roll around in the familiar valleys, until, like the boulder, we run out of momentum and come to a final stop. There are advantages to living in trenches: the enemy can't see you, so they can't shoot you. But there is also the problem that you can't see the enemy either.

Living in the trenches, or the valley, may offer protection, for a time, but when we are in the trenches, we can't see the lay of the land, the bigger picture. And when we lose sight of the bigger picture, we start losing a sense of what it is we are there for. When we get so entrenched in the idea that we have to preserve a building we forget that we are supposed to be the hands and feet and eyes and ears and words of Christ in the world. And when that happens, we start to lose momentum, until we stop, or until we can break out of the trench.

I told those gathered for that meeting in Ailsa Craig that one of the first things they needed to do is to talk with the other two congregations to figure out what their thoughts and plans are. You can't see your way to a new future when you don't know what your dance partner is thinking. But even before that, the very first thing they needed to do is to answer the question, "Why does God want you in Ailsa Craig right now?" Again, if you don't know what the choreographer is thinking, how do you make the right dance steps? They needed to stick their heads out of the trenches for long enough to see the lay of the land. They needed to stick their heads out of the trenches for long enough to see what God sees. They needed to stick their heads out of the trenches for long enough to see the future that God is calling them to.

Prepare the way of the Lord, calls John the Baptist. Fill in every valley and trench, bring low every mountain and hill, straighten out the crooked pathways, make smooth

the paths that are rough. When the hills are brought low and the trenches filled in, we can see the way of the Lord, we can see the world the way the Lord sees it, we can see what it is that we cannot see when we are stuck in the trench, we can see what it is that God calls us to, we can see who we need to be and what we need to do.

Therefore I say to you, go, prepare the way of the Lord. Tear down the mountains created out of fear; fill in the valleys of despair; and see the salvation of God who stands waiting in the plain. Amen.