

Habilitation!
Exodus 24:1-10, John 14:15-27
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
December 17, 2006 (Third Sunday of Advent)
Pastor Dave Carver

Ya gotta have a plan. Oh, boy, do you have to have a plan.

Carl McCunn was a gifted and talented photographer and a Navy veteran. In March of 1981 he arranged to spend the entire summer documenting the wildlife of the Alaskan tundra. He flew into a remote location with 500 rolls of film, 1400 pounds of food and provisions, photography equipment, and firearms. He kept a detailed diary of the experience. In February of 1982, an Alaska State Trooper found Mr. McCunn's wasted body frozen in a tent. One of the diary's later entries read tragically, "I think I should have used more foresight about arranging my departure." Mr McCunn died in a wilderness camp near a nameless lake in a nameless valley 225 miles from Fairbanks – all because he hadn't thought through all of the implications that following his dream might entail.¹ He knew how to get to that Valley. He had some idea as to how to get along in that valley for a season. But he didn't know how to *live* in that valley – and so he died there.

We've been following, loosely, the story of the Hebrew people since they got to Egypt at the end of Genesis. The book of Exodus tells us how they were delivered from Egypt by the God who revealed himself to them. After more than 400 years of waiting in a land that was not their own, God sends them Moses, and Moses leads them out of Egypt.

You know the story – the people left Egypt, they crossed the Red Sea, they find themselves free. Now what? For generations, they had been slaves in Egypt. Now they're in the desert, and they are perfectly trained...to be slaves. They knew how to make bricks, they knew how to take orders, they knew how to keep a low profile. But those skills were not necessarily the ones they most needed when they got into the desert. They needed to know how to live as God's people.

In one very important sense, that's what the Law of God does in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. The commandments are a sort of a "now what" to the freedom that they've been given. The Law provides God's people with a plan, of sorts, that they will use to live into the freedom that they've obtained.

In recent weeks, we've been contrasting Moses and Jesus, and have explored the ways that in the life and work of Moses, God chose to reveal himself and his word and to bring the gift of liberation. Jesus, in a much deeper and more profound sense than Moses, is God's gift of revelation and liberation. In today's readings, we see one more similarity – Moses and Jesus both provide a means by which God gives his people the gift of Habilitation.

Let me explain what I mean by that. Some years ago, I was involved in a prison ministry in Attica, New York. I was engaged in a conversation with one of the founders of that ministry, and I asked about the rehabilitation of prisoners.

¹ "Left In Wilds, Man Penned Dying Record", *The New York Times* 12/19/82.

He interrupted me and said, “Don’t talk to me about rehabilitation. There’s hardly any of these guys in here who can be rehabilitated. Do you know why?”

I sensed that the correct answer was “No.”

“I’ll tell you why. When you rehabilitate something, what are you doing? You are restoring it, right? You’re taking something that was once good, then got broken, and making it as good as new. These guys in here can’t be rehabilitated because they’ve never been *habilitated*. They grew up with no parents, no love, no expectations. We can’t restore them because they never had anything to start with. We have to teach them how to live. We are here to habilitate people.”

In Moses, God showed his people how to live. As he led them to freedom and revealed himself to them, they came to see his intentions for their lives. Look at the laws in the book of Exodus. Almost all of these laws are commands that deal with some specific aspect of the people’s behavior. That is, they are not laws about what to *think* or what to *believe*; they are laws about what to *do*. Why is God so concerned about their behavior? Because God is longing for them to develop a set of external practices that will give their internal lives shape and function. So you do worship in this way and you relate to other people in this way and you treat the environment in this way because in the treating of the world and others like this, you might just come to be someone who is a faithful follower of YHWH. In Exodus, it appears, belief follows practice. The heart and the head follow the hands and the feet.

But you know what happened. In the course of the next 1400 years, the Law stops being a gift to God’s people and instead becomes a blunt object. Instead of being a life-giving instrument of habilitation, it becomes a vehicle of control, shame, and eventually death. In fact, centuries after God gave humans the Law as a means to shape their faith and practice, the High Priests of the nation used that Law as a cover for killing Jesus. What was meant for life ended in death.

The followers of Jesus were in a similar position to that of the early Hebrews. They had loved, served, followed Jesus for three years. And now he was speaking openly about his death. Their reaction, not surprisingly, was one of fear and panic. “You’re leaving?!?! Now what? How are we going to live? Show us what to do! Habilitate us, for crying out loud!”

And look at how Jesus responds: he says what good religious people would expect him to say – he says, “You want to know how to live? You’ve already got it! Live the commandments. Follow the Law.”

But he doesn’t stop there. He says that they have a new way of following the Law. Instead of starting with people’s external behavior alone, Jesus also promises a change of heart. “Follow the commands I’ve taught you,” he says, “and my Father will come to you by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

How are the followers of Christ habilitated? First and foremost, by “keeping the word”. That is, by taking what he has taught and by living it. Crucial to our understanding of that, though, is the strong implication of community throughout the passage of John. The disciples are gathered in a community, asking “How can *we*...?” or “what about *us*...?” Jesus responds by talking about

a God who lives and dwells in community: “These things I have spoken...while I am still with you (plural). But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you (plural) all things, and bring to your (plural) remembrance all that I have taught to you (plural).” God, in God’s self and God’s nature, exists in Community – Father, Son and Spirit. And here, Jesus is saying that if we want to live the Jesus way – if we want to be habilitated, we find that in community as well.

So that makes our Advent observation crucial. Because that means that what we are doing here is NOT just pretend. We’ve spoken a couple of times recently about how in many ways, the observances around Christmas have a sort of “let’s pretend” feel to them. “Wow! Mary’s pregnant! Whoa, didn’t see that coming! I wonder if she’ll have a boy or a girl...” We set up the manger and we tell the story and we say that we are looking forward to the coming of Jesus – but of course, Jesus has come. We know the Story because the Story has already happened.

But our Advent waiting is not merely a recital of something that happened two millennia ago. It is also a rehearsal for our habilitation as followers of that Baby. We gather in community and listen to the word and listen for The Word in the hopes that in this community and at this time the Counselor will come and give us a new way of living today. When Jesus was talking with his original disciples, he promised that the Holy Spirit would help them to remember all that he had said. Great! That’s how we ended up with the Bible – the apostles remembered what he said and wrote it down. But he also says that the Spirit will teach them – and us – all things. We are not here only to remember, but to learn. To be shaped afresh.

One of the things that you are likely to hear in the next few days is this: “Oh, Christmas...you know, it’s for the kids. We have to give the kids a good Christmas.”

Phooey. It’s not only for the kids. It’s for all of us. We are all called to wait, to watch, to hope, and to live into God’s future. We all need to be habilitated so that we can live as disciples – so that we can sing “Joy to the World!” as if we really believed that Jesus is interested in visiting lives like ours in times like this – not just stables in the Middle East. We can sing “O Come, All ye Faithful” and know that it applies to us, here, now, and that we’re not simply looking back on a rosy glow of memories of coming to church with Grandpa.

Ya gotta have a plan, friends. How will you experience the presence of the Christ this season? Follow me and wait with me – not only at the manger – but in the presence of the Counselor who was promised. And together, let us ask the Lord for his wisdom in our lives. Amen.