

Have You Polished Your Shoes?

An old farmer was about to die and he called his two sons to his bedside. He said, "Boys, my farm and the fields are yours. You each have equal shares. I leave you a little ready money, but the bulk of my wealth is hidden somewhere in the ground of the farm. I'm not sure anymore quite where it is, but it's not more than 18 inches from the surface. In time, of course, the old man died, and the sons inherited the farm. Not long afterwards they set to work digging up every inch of ground, but they failed to find any treasure. However, since they'd gone to all the trouble of turning the soil, they thought they might as well sow a crop - which they did, reaping a good harvest.

The following autumn as soon as they had an opportunity, they dug for the treasure again, but with no better results. As their fields were turned over more thoroughly than any others in the neighborhood, they reaped better harvests than anyone else. Year after year, their search continued... and year after year they gained a good crop. It was only when they had grown older that they realized what their father had done.

John the Baptist began his ministry ignoring, in many flaunting, all the norms. He dressed like a wild man; he ranted like a mad man and at times could be downright rude. Some found him inspiring, others annoying; and many found him interesting, at least for a little while. Even today, John the Baptist's fiery call to repentance sounds harsh when we're in the midst of preparations for the baby Jesus. Babies are sweet and cuddly; they do require attention, but not repentance. At first hearing, this story from Scripture seems really out of sync with the season! Having a person with no earthly desires and no earthly fears elbow in during our time of celebrating, shopping, and somewhat fearfully attempting to bring about the perfect holiday, is a disruption, to say the least.

What level of maturity in faith must be achieved before the wisdom and necessity of John to the Christmas Story begins to be realized. How important it is to have it plainly stated that Christmas preparation is not about all that we may be busy doing. John hollows out that we prepare for Christmas by repenting. Repenting in the Biblical sense is something far greater than having a change of heart or a feeling of regret. It is more than a New Year's Eve resolution. Repentance is a turning away and a turning back; a turning away from sin and a turning back to God. It is embracing the "God with us" which so frightened some by the thought of what "God-with-us" would do to their social power and privilege that it lead from the baby to the cross.

A young woman is preparing for her first job interview. With her parents' help an appropriate suit has been chosen, pressed and laid out, each button checked and any errant strings removed. She feels ready, though nervous. She is feeling somewhat grown up and yet quite the little girl. As she shares her relief that all is in readiness and the interview will come on the next day, her father asks if her shoes have been polished. The daughter states they are fine, that it has not been that long since their last cleaning. The father then asks for the shoes and upon receiving them, carefully polishes and

shines them. The daughter begrudgingly acknowledges the difference though not sure that it was worth all the work.

The interview comes, and goes well. A few days pass and the young woman is hired. A few months after, a relationship builds between the young woman and her interviewer. One day in casual sharing the young woman learns that it was a close and difficult choice between her and another when her position was filled. She heard the story of how after several days of reviewing resumes and interview notes, the decision was made, based on the attention to detail shown by her perfectly polished shoes.

In a land and a time when that which grew from the land was understood to be vital for human life, crops, trees and grazing land which flourished was seen as a sign of God's blessing, of God's pleasure and presence. Then comes this "Thus says the Lord" man, this man who indeed seems to "get it" when it comes to being and living in relationship with God; saying that it is out of a stump from the tree of Jesse, a mere twig, that which could be easily snapped from its roots, that "a branch shall grow out of ..and .²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear;⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins." All from a stump, from what appears to be useful only as firewood. What a difficult message to hear, to believe. What a difficult message to preach.

It is almost Christmas and there is such a lovely story to share, a story of a beautiful mother, a heroic father, and a sweet-beyond-sweet baby. It is a story of harmony and happiness. It is a story of angels singing and animals bowing. Yet it is also a story of a life, of a man, of challenge and of death. All these must be a part of the story for the story to have meaning beyond its loveliness. All of these must be a part of the story in order to acknowledge and celebrate what happened when God drew near and entered into humanity.

Turning the soil, disregarding the earthly desires and earthly fears, polishing shoes, pointing out the Godly value of that which the world sees no value in, and taking a lovely, almost fairy tale type story and making it real, making it vital to reality, vital to life; these do not come naturally. These are those things which take effort, self-denial, doing what may not seem to make a difference, what may even be an irritation to some. These are the things which can only be discovered when we are deliberate in looking past the surface, past the obvious, past ourselves. These are the things of God, the things which require Emmanuel, God with us. Just as we can discover a deeper sense of Advent and Christmas in naming and reviewing our expectations, so can we become more ready for Christ to be born in us by moving into the depth which is beyond first appearances. Where will we find power in this season? Where will we find joy, peace and love? It will be when we look not for them, but are seeking only God.