

ADVENT TWO, YEAR C, DECEMBER 5, 2021

I like to tell you a story this morning. It's about a woman named Myrtle who lived in a nursing home. Even though Myrtle was confined to a wheelchair she was able to navigate around carts filled with lunch trays, medical equipment, stretchers, etc that always seemed to fill the hallways of the nursing home. She was proud that she could be at least that independent.

Myrtle was what some people would call difficult. Nothing seemed to please Myrtle and everything apparently bothered her. She was quick to let everyone know when she was unhappy and demanded that things that made her unhappy be dealt with immediately. Others would describe her as being crotchety. Myrtle was estranged from her only daughter because she was furious with her that she had put her in the nursing home. It didn't matter to her that her doctor and the visiting nurse had recommended to her daughter that she be placed in a nursing facility for her own health and safety. She blamed her daughter.

Myrtle was a well educated woman who had prided herself on being able to take care of herself since her husband died. Living in a nursing facility was not something she had ever anticipated and she railed at her body for failing her the way it did. Her physical body might have failed but her mind was sharp as a tack. Myrtle had always been an avid reader from the moment she learned how to read. It was her only solace and comfort to be able to read all her favorite classics when she wasn't being interrupted by other patients hollering and screaming or being poked and prodded by a nurse. Myrtle could barely tolerate the place but she did attempt to involve herself in the activities the nursing facility provided. Otherwise, she thought, she'd go stark raving mad.

So, every week Myrtle would attend the church service in the nursing home's activity room. Visiting clergy would provide the service and offer a homily. Before she had gone to live at the nursing home Myrtle had been fairly active in her church until she had become more and more housebound because of her illnesses. Not having the outlet of being so involved in her church had made her view these so called church services with a jaded eye. The ministers came and went every week and Myrtle had a tendency to grade them on their performances.

One morning the preacher was a retired Presbyterian minister who was probably older than some of the residents in the nursing home which surprised her. Even though the hallways were all a shimmer with Christmas decorations and residents rooms were filled with trees and cardboard Santa cutouts the minister had carefully reminded them that it was still Advent – a time for waiting. Even though Christmas carols had been playing through the building for weeks there were no Christmas hymns sung during the service. “Not yet, the pastor said, “not yet.” Myrtle didn't care they weren't singing Christmas hymns as she didn't have much Christmas spirit anyway.

The minister that morning preached about John the Baptist. The scripture was so familiar to her it had become almost boring! “Prepare the way of the Lord”, make his paths straight!” How many times in her 80 plus years had she heard that passage? What could anyone say about it that she already hadn't heard before? As she listened Myrtle had to concede that this man was a fairly decent preacher unlike other ministers who treated the nursing home residents as if they were mindless children. He had painted a very vivid word portrait of John the Baptist – a wild man in a hair shirt who ate honey and

locusts and went around preaching repentance and telling everyone "every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low".

Myrtle even grudgingly admired the Advent Wreath the activity director had created and gave the minister extra points for allowing one of the residents to light the second candle on the wreath or, as he called, it the candle of peace. Myrtle was even a tad grateful as she watched and listened to the presbyterian minister treat even those residents who stared blankly at him or could barely understand a word he said as adults and with dignity. He talked about current events and other newsworthy items in his sermon as if everyone was cognizant of them. Then he focused back on Advent as a time of waiting and preparing and John the Baptist. He asked them, "what do you suppose John the Baptist meant when he called out "the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth?"

Then, to Myrtle's surprise he confronted the nursing home residents by saying, "We have just lit a candle of peace. Most of us look at what's happening in the world and think we can't possibly have any impact at all on making our earth more peaceful. So, we put blinders on and go about our day to day lives without giving a thought to the suffering we see. That is until it touches our own lives and even then, we sometimes turn away from our own suffering."

Then the presbyterian minister challenged them by suggesting that each person there think of the "rough spots" in their lives. He said, "we're meant to be using this time before Christmas to make room in ourselves for the spirit of Jesus. What rough places in your life need smoothing out in order for that to happen to you? At that point he seemed to be looking directly at Myrtle when he said it and she had begun to feel a bit uncomfortable although she didn't understand why. Then came the piece de resistance? With what she saw was a steely glint in his eyes he finished his sermon with these words, "Even the tiniest effort to smooth the rough places in our lives makes a difference! Even the smallest attempt at peace-making brings that much more peace to life! If the coming of Jesus doesn't mean at least this, then the Christmas story is just an empty story!"

Back in her room, Myrtle had gotten herself painfully from her wheelchair to her recliner and was thinking about what the minister had said. But instead of feeling a little bit of peace after the service she was even more crotchety. The crotchety disgust she felt was aimed at both the pastor and herself. What did he know about her life?! What right did he have to ask her to be a peace-maker?! And what right did she have to be angry with him when, deep down this kind of spiritual stretching was exactly what she had been longing for?

As Myrtle was alternating between disgust and admiration for the preacher and herself the resident across the hall George started up with his "Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!" screeching. Immediately and an all-too-familiar flood of rage filled Myrtle's mind. She angrily reached for her call bell. She couldn't understand why this man was still on "her" unit?! He belonged in the Alzheimer's wing, not here where there had once been some small amount of peace and quiet. She hadn't been able to read any of her beloved books for weeks now because of the noise from across the hall. A nurse's aide appeared at her door, and Myrtle shouted at her, "Shut my door! And his!"

The nurse's aide responded, I can do that Mrs. Pederson, but you know that just makes it worse. He gets frightened when he sees your door or his closed." "Leave it then," Myrtle said angrily. She was fuming and started rummaging in the drawer of her

bedside table for her address book – anything to keep her distracted from the noises coming from across the hall. As she was rummaging, she encountered her Bible as well. She realized as she touched her Bible how the feeling of violence within herself was consuming her so with a deep breath she prayed aloud, “Dear God, help me. Help me to find peace. She paused and took a few more deep breaths and continued, “help me to be a peace-maker – to smooth out these rough places. I don’t have a clue how to do it.”

But even as she prayed, Myrtle knew she had clues aplenty. She winced when she realized she had to look up her daughter's phone number. When her daughter answered, Myrtle said as calmly as she could, "Rose, I have been a fool and a coward. Would you come here and talk with me one day this week? We need to begin mending what's broken between us." She wasn't quite sure what she heard in her daughter's voice but it didn't matter because her daughter had agreed to come.

After lunch, which had been quiet for the brief time it took for George to eat his roast beef and potatoes, Myrtle hefted herself into her wheelchair again, picked up her well-worn copy of Robert Frost's poetry, and wheeled herself across the hallway. The busy nurse's aides were clearing trays and helping folks to bed for an afternoon nap. It took them nearly an hour in the midst of their hard work before they realized that something in the spirit of the place had shifted. One-by-one they drifted to the doorway of George's room until all six of them stood there peeking in, transfixed by the sight of crotchety old Myrtle reading to George.

Myrtle looked up, embarrassed, and said with mock crossness, "This wasn't my idea! I noticed last week how quiet he was when that volunteer lady sat here and read his hunting magazines to him. I guess he just needs company, and I guess this is the only way I'm ever going to get to read my favorite books again."

There's a voice in the wilderness crying, "Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight! Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low! The crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth! And all flesh shall see the salvation of God!" How will you smooth out the rough spots in your life and make peace this Advent? Amen.