

“Under Construction”

Luke 3:1–6

Philippians 1:3–11

This letter from the Apostle Paul reminds me a little of Christmas letters that appear in our mail. And I do like to receive and read them. But there are some that soar off into the stratosphere of bragging. But they are the exception, rather than the rule. You know how those letters go, though. They might sound something like this:

*Dear Loved Ones,*

*It's been a wonderful year for us in every way. Our youngest grandchild graduated magna cum laude from kindergarten. And her teenage brother received a letter of commitment to play football for the Ohio State University, but he's weighing that with a pre-med offer from Harvard. And you remember our daughter, who once looked so adorable in pigtails. Earlier this year, she received the Nobel Prize for Physics, won the Pillsbury Bake-Off, and gave birth to triplets. As for ourselves, we are blessed with great teeth, flat bellies, and wrinkle-free complexions.*

And so it goes. Despite those occasional excesses, I still enjoy Christmas letters and the hope, courage, and resilience that they so often describe. And they reassure me that the bonds of love hold fast across time and space.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ Jesus.”

Notice that Paul takes no credit for the good work, neither does he give credit to his friends for the progress that has already been made. They are engaged in a massive construction project, but it is not a project they originated.

Rather it is God's idea—**the renewal and reconciliation of their lives ... and of the world.** God started this project. God will finish it. There will be no darkness unvanquished,  
no buildings left unbuilt,

no conflict unresolved,  
no death unanswered by life  
when God completes God's work.

No wonder our cards and letters and songs and greetings overflow with joy, love, and confidence at this time of year. This is the season when we remember that God truly is doing something new and awesome in the world, and we have the privilege of being a part of it.

News about what God was doing in the world was exactly what the angel had to share with the shepherds on that night so long ago:

“Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which will be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke

2:10–12).

**And what will he bring into the world?** Healing, love, peace. God is determined to win the world with love. And you and I, just like the members of the fledging church in Philippi, make a contribution to God's renewal project by continuing to wash the world with our love.

“This is my prayer,” Paul writes, “that your love may overflow more and more with the knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best.”

Throughout this entire passage, Paul never uses a singular pronoun. All the “yous” are plural, which means that what God has begun is a community project.

You remember the hymn that seems to live forever: “I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses... and he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own.”

That hymn is not untrue. But it simply tells half the truth. The **truth** is that we are **God's together. In unity. In harmony.** The good work that God has begun cannot be reduced to the life of one individual. That is why we gather in community, and give to mission, and build churches, and schools and clinics. That's why we graciously welcome others, and touch lives. There is great work that God is doing in the broader realms of culture and society. It is the world that will be redeemed. “All flesh,” the prophet said, “shall see the salvation of God” (Isaiah 40:5).

I am looking forward to the Harp concert this evening. As we turn on the lights to illumine the exterior of our sanctuary. and candles

glimmer from the windows, I will be thinking of Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church as one of God's Christmas letters to the community. As people walk and drive by, and walk-in they will see this beautiful sanctuary, and our friends and neighbors will remember that "the true light that enlightens *everyone* is coming into the world" (John 1:4), that God's grace is for all, that God has great plans and everyone is included.

*So our Christmas card to the community reads ...*

*May peace and joy be yours, dear neighbors,  
now and always.*

*Sincerely,*

*Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church*

Last summer when we visited our grandson in Chicago, I learned that the landscape architect Frederick Olmsted designed and produced all the outdoor features of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Olmsted left a legacy of exceptional beauty along the Lake Michigan lakefront.

"Every element," Olmsted wrote, "must have one supreme object, that is the property of **becomingness**; the *becomingness* of everything that may be seen as a modest contribution to the grand whole."

***Becomingness***: What a wonderful lens through which to look at what God is doing with the world and how the modest Head of Christiana Church is privileged to play in the great, enduring purposes of God.

***Becomingness*** of another sort was what John the Baptist had in mind when he traveled up and down the banks of the Jordan River, with a message that combined vinegar and fire.

He proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his path straight.'" There was nothing modest about John or his approach. Yes, God is going to lift up the valleys and bring the mountains low, but your opportunity is to do some necessary roadwork to prepare the way. John's message was intensely personal. You have work to do in order to receive the blessing of the new in the world and in your life.

Some months ago, a friend sent me a story by email. It was one of those stories that floats around the internet and I wonder, did this really happen? Or is it simply trying to make a point. Anyway, It

caught my attention. It had to do with an incident at a city traffic light. The light had turned green, and the car that was closest to the light didn't move. The driver in the second car blew his horn; the man in the first car remained oblivious to the green light. The second driver blew his horn again; the first car didn't move. The second driver began pounding the steering wheel; he screamed and cursed and, of course, the light turned yellow, and the man ahead finally woke up, drove off, and left the second car to sit and wait through still another red light.

The driver was furious. He was pounding on his steering wheel again when he heard a tap on his window. He looked out to see a police officer, who ordered him to get out of the car. He handcuffed him, took him to the police station, fingerprinted him, and put him in a cell. Hours passed.

Finally he was taken back to the booking desk, where the officer who arrested him was waiting. "Sir," he said, "I'm very sorry for the mistake, but I pulled up behind you while you were blowing your horn and cursing; and then I noticed the bumper sticker on the right side of your car: 'What would Jesus do?' On the left bumper was that other bumper sticker: 'Follow me to Sunday school.' And then there was the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on your trunk. **So naturally I assumed that you had stolen the car!**"

Sometimes there is a gap between who we think we are and who we actually are. Pay attention to that gap, John the Baptist urges. Think about what you can do to live a life that better reflects the ways and purposes and spirit of God. And how do you do that?

John the Baptist is clear as a bell about the approach. Repentance is what he urged. The gospel he proclaimed was "a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3).

*Repentance* is a word we don't hear often today, but it is an ancient and good word. In Greek, it means "to change." It indicates a change of mind, a change of direction. A change of heart. 180 degrees. As one wise person put it, "no amount of extra effort will ever help a runner who is headed in the wrong direction."

To repent is to turn around and face the right way, to look in the direction in which salvation is to come, and to do the work that is necessary to welcome salvation when it comes into our lives.

Redemption/restoration/renewal—that is all **God's doing**; but repentance—that is to be **our agenda** during this season of Advent. Our agenda is to think about how to close the gap in our life between the person that we wish we were and the person that we actually are.

This is the time to make the crooked places more straight;  
to stop doing things that separate us from other  
people and from God;  
to clear our consciences of old,  
energy-draining guilt;  
to  
live  
take inventory of the principles by which we  
out our business and professional and  
retirement life;  
to tell the truth about the logs that  
might exist in our own eye, before we  
identify the specs in the eyes of others.

We should try to clean up our act a little bit, now that we know that the Lord is surely coming.

Wake up. Pay attention. Change your life. "Prepare the way of the Lord!" John the Baptist cried.

If we promise nothing else this Advent, let it be that we, as people of faith, will make sure that the way we live out our Christian faith will never be through the corrosion of unbending self-righteousness and other ways of being religious that give birth to all manner of violence and human hurt.

Let us wake up and be kinder Christians. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us that "darkness will never drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hatred will never drive out hatred. Only love can conquer hatred."

What is the mission of Head of Cristiana Presbyterian Church? To drive out hatred with love and to drive out darkness with light. I can think of no better reasons for this church to exist for another hundred years than to be that light.

Do you remember in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, how one day Ebenezer Scrooge, stingy and flint-hearted Scrooge, woke up to his future, after the visit of the third Spirit? To his great relief, Scrooge discovered that "the bedpost was his own, the bed was his own, and,

best and happiest of all, the Time before him was his own to make amends in!”

This is a wonderful time of year for all of us to think whether there is something in our own lives that might be blocking progress on the construction project that is a whole new us. Guilt washed away. Fear transformed by hope. It’s never too late to begin again. While it is unrealistic to expect perfection or completion in our lifetime, God the master builder really does want to get started now, so that the blessings of Christmas may be ours, when Jesus, child of Mary, is born in a manger—God’s Christmas gift to you and to the world.

Amen.