

“The Beauty of Winter”
EpiphanyC-03 – January 24, 2010

Preaching Text: *“[God] has sent me to proclaim the release of the captives and recovery of the sight of the blind, to let the oppressed go free...”*
(Luke 4:18)

What’s the beauty of winter? Well, for one thing, it means zero lawn work. It means not having to do a darn thing. Instead of spending my day off pushing a lawn mower, pruning a bush, spreading mulch or blowing leaves, it means I can look out my window at home without a shred of guilt, having done absolutely nothing. What contentment. What delight.

Which reminds me of my first house. When initially surveying the property with the realtor and the chair of the church’s search committee, Martha, who was showing me around town, it was love at first sight.

Situated in a fairly remote area surrounded by woods, the small house, though pleasant, wasn’t the real selling point. It was the grounds instead. To say they were beautiful is an understatement.

For starters, there was not one, but two, beautiful, luxuriant lawns. The first, edged by stockade fencing, sloped gently down from the house, while the second lay opposite a perfect line of tall cypress trees that divided the property into two. To get to the back lawn, one would walk through a lovely white archway nestled in the trees. At a certain point, the back lawn blended naturally into a dense forest, as far as the eye could see.

But I’m not done. Not only were both lawns perfect, lush and green with nary a weed, but the property as a whole was surrounded by plantings timed to come out in stages, so that no sooner had one flower or bush bloomed than another took its place. The entire setting was a jewel of symmetry, color and beauty.

Looking things over, Martha, a shrewd customer with a practiced eye, said, half facetiously, “Well if the house is even just ok, it’s worth it.” She then exclaimed, “You could even hold weddings here!”

At first, I’ll admit, things started out grandly. But over time, the bushes started to get overgrown. The back lawn turned to moss, for want of sunlight. Even the front lawn began to look a bit distressed.

During the first fall, I spent a whole day furiously raking leaves. Eventually, out of sheer exhaustion, I couldn't go on and left an unfinished pile for the next day.

As fate would have it, the next spring I noticed violets, forming a perfect circle, occupying the very spot the leaf pile had stood overnight some six months earlier.

For the uninitiated, violets are really quite pretty when they bloom in the spring, with their gleaming bright purple tint. Eventually, though, they spread like wildfire, choking off any and all grass that gets in their way. In the end, they are nothing more than yet another ugly broadleaf weed, but with attitude.

I tried everything to get rid of them...to no avail. Then, in the local paper one day, I read a gardening column where someone had asked how to get rid of violets. Finally I'd get my answer. Only the expert's one-word response proved unsettling: "Move!" he wrote.

In some sense, this has become for me a metaphor for life. Without any prior training in caring for a lawn or property, I dumbly assumed, quite unconsciously, that somehow the place would remain beautiful in perpetuity. Only later did I learn that the prior owner had had professional gardeners in not once but twice a week! That's why the place looked so beautiful.

Under my tutelage, benign neglect became the order of the day. And believe me, it showed. Over time what once had been a showplace became an eyesore.

Over the last few weeks, I've written and preached what's become, unwittingly, a sermon series of sorts. Beginning on Christmas Eve, I talked about the human tendency to think this world is all there is, that we all but forget the reality that is heaven, itself a totally separate reality.

Only, it seems, at Christmastime do we suspend our hard-boiled, this-worldly mindset long enough to entertain the magical "other-ness" of life, and its nod to the wholly transcendent, to heaven.

In the next sermon, I talked about how our faith teaches that though we live on earth, our true home is in heaven. Though the Israelites were forced to live in the foreign city of their captors, Babylon, they never forgot their true home in Zion.

Though we Christians make our home here on earth, though we build homes, plant gardens, rear families and seek properly the welfare of our world, for its welfare is our welfare, we must never forget that our true home is, as Augustine named it, the “city of God,” heaven. We are, properly, citizens of heaven.

Last week, I talked about the horrors of the Haitian tragedy, asking the perennial question as to how we, as believers in a good and loving God, are to understand such evil.

After the 8:30 service, a member of the congregation approached me with a question, an interesting question. He began by saying, in effect, “I get that God doesn’t cause evil; Satan does, and that the reason God has sent Christ is to rescue all people from this evil.”

“What I wonder about, though,” he added, “is why. What is Satan trying to do? What is his purpose?”

He then went on to speculate. “Maybe by planting doubts in our minds that God is not good,” he said, “Satan is trying to make us think God cannot be trusted, or that it is *God* who is evil.”

I suggested he read C.S. Lewis’ tongue-in-cheek classic, *The Screwtape Letters*, where a newly-minted apprentice in Satan’s army is guided by his largely unsympathetic uncle, a longtime veteran, as to how to encourage a newly converted Christian to turn away from God.

Though we don’t always recognize it as such, the Bible assumes our world is fallen, where evil is, simply put, the order of the day. Goodness, godliness, in other words, is the exception. Thus God sends Jesus Christ into our world, a beachhead planted on enemy territory.

This past week, in Bible Study, where we are studying Ephesians, we talked about the pagan world into which the apostle Paul moved, preaching the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We talked about how it has been estimated that 60,000,000 slaves existed in the Roman Empire alone. Slavery was, at that time, a perfectly acceptable institution.

We also talked about how women in those days had no rights whatsoever, and were treated as the mere property of men. In Greece and Rome, prostitution was not only accepted, married men were almost expected to indulge in it. A wife could raise no protest.

Children in Paul's time were property also, and lived at the whim of their father. In Rome, for instance, a newborn baby would be brought before the father. If the father saw any defect or the child simply did not please him for whatever reason, the child could be ordered thrown away or sold. There was absolutely no social stigma attached to this whatsoever. It was perfectly acceptable.

Today, thankfully, we live in a civilization where such things are anathema, due to the fact that we have benefited from two thousand years of Christianity's influence. Over two millennia, Christian values, Christian truths, have made significant inroads into enemy territory.

We today live indebted to the sacrifices of those who came before us, and benefit from the profound changes they were able to forge in our world, changes that would have astounded the earliest Christians.

From a tiny beachhead in Bethlehem, Christian truth and Christian values have spread far and wide, altering the very foundations of our world.

And here's where my once perfect lawn comes into play. My fear is that contemporary Christians too often assume moral culture is a given, rather than something constantly in danger of being lost, that necessarily requires constant effort on our part in order to be maintained.

I once lived in a house that's environs were idyllic. But without considerable dedication and effort in sustaining it, it was lost, and in short order.

Jesus, in his first public address, quotes Isaiah, reminding his hearers of how God one day would release the captives, bring sight to the blind and allow the oppressed to go free, and naming himself as the means by which that long-ago prophecy would come true.

The Church, the embodiment of Christ throughout the ages, must be continuously about the work of fighting for these things, never letting up, mindful that heaven has not yet fully come, that we live "between times," between Christ's first coming and that unspecified time when Christ shall come again.

May we never take for granted the moral and spiritual progress begun in Christ, for rust, and weeds, never sleep. Amen.