

THE
MOSSY
CREEK
CHRONICLES



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CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Make It Plain...

Mark 1:1-8



Well, it's Advent, isn't it? But that's fairly new in Mossy Creek. It didn't show up at Our Savior Presbyterian Church until 1983. That's when northern and southern Presbyterians finally put the War Between the States behind them and

got back together again. At first folks weren't real sure what to think about Advent. The way they figured, it came from the northern branch of the Presbyterian family tree, and not everybody was all that sure about doing church northern style. But they eventually got over it, and almost everybody likes it now.

But now there are some things Presbyterians in Mossy Creek do only during Advent. There is an Advent wreath. Folks just love that. But what they really love is a couple with a baby lighting one of those candles. They say it reminds them of Jesus' birth. I've even heard people say it is like having a little bit of Bethlehem right in the middle of Mossy Creek. And then there is an Advent Bible study after worship complete with a carry-in lunch. Bible study and lunch all at the same time—you can't hardly beat that.

But there is something else that is bigger than those two put together. It is the pulpit-exchange between Our Savior Presbyterian Church and Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Now you might remember me talking about First Baptist Church a few weeks ago. And you might be wondering how on earth a town the size of Mossy Creek could end up with two Baptist churches. Well, Mount Zion Baptist Church is an African-American church. The pulpit exchange was something Pastor Marianne helped put together. And like Advent, folks weren't real sure about that at first either.

But it didn't take long for it to become another Advent tradition. The pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church is the Reverend Frederick Douglass Thompson. He has been the pastor at Mt. Zion for years now. He runs a funeral home during the week and takes care of his flock at night and on weekends. He is a fine,

hard-working man. But he is also old school. He calls all of the pastors in town “reverend.” And he appreciates it when they extend him the same courtesy. So when Pastor Marianne showed up at the funeral home one Friday afternoon, she smiled and said, “Reverend Thompson, how are you doing?”

He replied, “I’m well, Reverend Calhoun. I hope you are.” She chuckled and replied, “I am. Thank you for asking.” She laughed because Reverend Thompson was pretty nearly the only person in Mossy Creek who called her by her last name. She said, “I thought you and I might finish up preparations for worship this Sunday.” She handed him a bulletin and then opened the one she kept for herself.

He scanned it, smiled and said, “If it suits you, it tickles me.” Pastor Marianne smiled and said, “It suits me. I was wondering if you wanted to give your sermon a title this year.” He laughed and said, “Now, Reverend Calhoun, why would I start inventing sermon titles after all these years?” She replied, “I was just checking. I just want to make sure everything is ready for Sunday.”

Their conversation was amazing if you think about it. Pastor Marianne’s family tree went all the way back to the Calhouns of South Carolina. You may not know it, but John Calhoun was the man who thought up the political theory that defended slavery and led South Carolina and eleven other southern states to leave the Union in 1861.

The Reverend Thompson got his name from Frederick Douglass, the most famous free black man in the United States before the war. Frederick Douglass had escaped from slavery and was among its most vocal critics. Imagine that.

Just imagine one of John Calhoun's descendants chatting with a man named for Frederick Douglass. And now, they were going to swap pulpits and preach to each other's congregation. Just goes to show, you never can tell.



Well, the second Sunday of Advent came and went. And the pulpit exchange went just fine. But John the Baptist in his camel-hair clothes couldn't have looked any stranger to the people he preached to than a black man preaching to white Presbyterians or a white Presbyterian pastor in a pulpit robe preaching to black Baptists. After church the folks at Mt. Zion thanked Pastor Marianne and told her she preached a fine sermon. And truth be told, that was about the same response Reverend Thompson got at Our Savior Presbyterian Church.

And when he and Pastor Marianne got together for coffee on Monday morning at Melvin's, they both expected to compliment each other on sermons

well preached. Then they would promise to do the pulpit exchange next year. That is what they were both expecting when they sat down in a booth in Melvin's.

And that is likely what would have happened if Reverend Thompson hadn't told Pastor Marianne that a member of his flock thought her sermon was "nice." Now, Pastor Marianne had been in Mossy Creek long enough to know what that meant. It meant her sermon hadn't exactly been a big success. She knew she shouldn't have, but it was like she couldn't help herself. She nervously laughed and then asked Reverend Thompson what his folks really thought.

He put his coffee cup down and said, "Well, they thought your sermon was pretty polite considering that it was about John the Baptist. We don't have Advent like ya'll, but we do have John the Baptist, and they were expecting you to tell them to get rid of the things in their lives that are rubbing the Lord the wrong way."

Pastor Marianne thought for a second and then asked, "They thought I was too nice? I used an illustration to keep from sounding rude. I told them repentance was like heading down the wrong road, figuring that out, and then backtracking until you got back to the place where you took the wrong turn. I told them we all need to be on the right road headed in the right direction."

Reverend Thompson quickly reassured her and said, "Oh, I understand. And I think they did, too. They're just used to getting their coffee black without any sugar." He laughed and continued, "I guess by now they're used to me being pretty plain in what I have to say. I'm sure your sermon was fine. It always is."

Then he paused, looked down into his coffee cup and said, “Who knows? Maybe your folks thought I was a little too plain.” When Pastor Marianne didn’t answer right away, he knew he was close to the truth. He chuckled and said, “That’s one reason for doing the pulpit exchange, isn’t it? Hearing somebody different gets you to thinking.”

Pastor Marianne nodded her head in agreement. Then she said, “Pretty plain... I’m probably not very good at that.” Then she put her coffee cup down and chuckled, “I guess John the Baptist wouldn’t be a Presbyterian. He’s a little too plain, and it looks like we may be a little too polite.”

Reverend Thompson smiled and said, “Well, he did come preaching repentance, didn’t he? Telling people to give up their wicked ways before something really bad happened to them, calling his enemies a herd of snakes—John the Baptist was a good man, but he wasn’t very nice, was he?” He paused and then said, “It’s amazing. People came from all over to hear him preach. Maybe you can be plain with people without running them off.” He paused again and then said, “Telling the truth—that’s our calling. Folks won’t always like what we have to say. But the Bible says the Lord won’t give us more than we can bear. I guess we can be plain in our preaching and get away with it.”



Pastor Marianne said, “I guess so.” She sipped her coffee and then asked, “But if the Holy Spirit is what helps people to understand the scriptures and what we’re saying, what difference does it make if we preach one way or the other? We dig the well, and God gives our congregations the water.”

Reverend Thompson replied, “I think our preaching ought to sound like the scriptures we’re preaching. If they’re comforting, we should be comforting. If they’re plain, we should be plain. I don’t know about changing the Bible’s tone of voice. We probably shouldn’t make John the Baptist sound too polite. We might end up changing his message so that it suits us better.” He paused and then said, “We don’t want to turn into thin-skinned preachers fishin’ for friends.”

Well, Pastor Marianne hadn’t thought of that. And the next thing you know, she was thinking out loud. This conversation was going to take more than one cup of coffee. After the waitress refilled their coffee cups, Pastor Marianne

said, "I see what you mean. But how do we know when to lighten up? How do we keep our folks from getting mad and tuning us out?"

Reverend Thompson replied, "Speaking for God is hard work. Dangerous, too. John the Baptist got more than his feelings hurt. He ended up with his head on a platter. But God called him to be the voice in the wilderness that told people to get ready for the coming of the Lord. And he was God's messenger that prepared the way of the Lord by preaching repentance. Isn't that how we get ready for the Lord's return? We can't worry too much about whether folks like what we say or not. They aren't getting ready if they keep on living like they always have." He paused and said, "You know, Jesus came preaching repentance, too. Even after John the Baptist died, the message didn't change."

Pastor Marianne said, "Hmmm... So you're saying Advent is mostly about Jesus' return, but it involves more than just waiting for Him to come back. It means changing the way we live right now."

Reverend Thompson said, "I think so. We're not supposed to be living any ol' way we want. We have to make that plain. Jesus wants us to change right now. And then when He shows up, we can count on Him to forgive us for all the times we fail. Reverend Calhoun, I don't know if we can turn that into a pretty picture people will finally understand. If all we preach about this time of year is Jesus' birth, folks might get the idea we're just waiting for the birth of a savior who'll make everything alright when He shows up whether they're ready for His return or not."

Just about that time a man was headed to his pickup truck in front of Melvin's when somebody pulled into the parking space next to his. A woman opened the door of her car right into the side of the truck. It was like she never saw it. Well, that man started cussin' and carryin' on like he had just about lost his mind. You could hear it clear as day all the way inside Melvin's.

Well, in Mossy Creek, just about everybody knows everybody else. And Reverend Thompson knew where that man went to church. He had seen him the previous day at Our Savior Presbyterian Church. When things finally settled down, he said, "I could be wrong, but I don't think you can straighten something like that out with a picture. I doubt that a sermon illustration would be clear enough. Sometimes you just have to say it. He was plain in what he said. It might help him hear you be just as plain about what the Lord thinks about something like that."

Pastor Marianne nodded her head. Then she looked over her coffee cup at Reverend Thompson and said, "You know, there are three groups of people we're preaching to. The saints, I mean the real saints who don't carry on like that. And then there's the folks who aren't going to change just because we tell them to. Our sermons aren't going to affect them. We're really preaching to that big group in the middle that is trying to figure out what discipleship is going to cost them."

Reverend Thompson nodded his head and said, "That's likely so. But we have to preach the message to everybody. Each person that comes to church has to listen to what the Lord is saying to them through us. Does the Holy Spirit

help them hear and understand? Yes, indeed. But they have to decide what they're going to do or how they're going to change their lives. They have to understand they can't live sloppy lives. Otherwise, they might think we don't care. And then they might start thinking the Lord doesn't care, either. You know, churches and towns don't start changing until individuals change."

Pastor Marianne asked, "But aren't you afraid people will get the idea they're saving themselves? If they get to that point, they'll start thinking that Jesus might have just been a role model for us. Maybe they'll have this picture of Jesus just watching or cheering them on every day."

Reverend Thompson said, "They won't if we make it plain. Only Jesus saves us. What He did on the cross we could never do for ourselves. That's the Gospel, Reverend Calhoun." He paused, and then said, "You know, one of my members told me you put it pretty well. She heard you loud and clear when you said the way we live is how we show God how grateful we are for what Jesus has done for us. It's salvation first. That's God's doing. Then it's gratitude. That's our doing. Next is repentance. And finally it's discipleship. You couldn't have said it any plainer." He paused and then said, "And that's a fine piece of preaching. You may not preach just like John the Baptist, but you're one of the Lord's messengers, too. There's no doubt about that."

Well, I reckon some of you are thinking Reverend Thompson and Pastor Marianne went on to work and did what they always did the same way they always did it. Or maybe you're thinking Reverend Thompson decided to simmer down a little bit on his preaching and be just a little more pastoral like Pastor

Marianne. Or maybe you're thinking Pastor Marianne decided to worry less about what she said, what people thought about her, and more about makin' it plain. Maybe she took a page from Reverend Thompson's book and got to rarin' and tearin' in the pulpit the next Sunday.

Those are all good guesses. Heck, they're fine ideas. But the fact is, they did all of those things. There's a lot preachers can learn from each other. And there's always a lot we can learn from our preachers and the Good Book. This Advent if we come to church, listen real close to what the preacher and the Spirit are saying, it will come to us as plain as day. Prepare the way of the Lord. Get ready for His return. Turn your life around. Sack up the trash in your lives and get shut of it. That's repentance. Live the life God created you for. That's Advent. It's just that plain.



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