



Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2009
The Rev. Douglas E. Remer

Most people who visit Rockefeller Center in New York during the month of December see the great tree sparkling with its thousands of lights, the ice-skating rink with its array of accomplished and not-so-accomplished skaters going round and round and round again, and the teeming throngs of tourists busily snapping pictures of themselves, and of the tree, and of the skaters, and of the surrounding buildings, all of which are adorned with their own decorations and displaying the kinds of Christmas gifts that most of us would never dream to buy.

But a clergyman sees even more. We see all that the other visitors see, but we must also in everything seek to see a sermon. It is simply our peculiar plight in life: we cannot content ourselves with the obvious or relax without reflection. Always we seek meaning—or, if not meaning, at least sermon material. And that is why those people who were at Rockefeller Center in New York last December would be very surprised indeed to learn that they are this year part of a sermon being preached in Tampa, Florida.

There is no doubt that midtown New York is ripe with expectation during the holiday season, and I have noted on more than one occasion that it really does seem that the spirit of the place is a little warmer, a little less hostile, a little friendlier than during other times of the year. People actually smile at each other. Admittedly, those smiles may all be on the faces of the visitors, not the natives, but I would like to cut New Yorkers a bit of slack and think that even they are somehow softened by the carols that waft from the stores that line Fifth Avenue.

And so I am going to take that scene at Rockefeller Center, and I am going to describe it in light of this morning's Gospel reading about John the Baptist [Luke 3:7-18]. I may or may not succeed in making the connection I want, but I am going to have a good time trying.

And that is my first observation: most of the folks at Rockefeller Center last December were having a good time. They acted as though they may have heard and heeded the warning of John the Baptist, and were "bearing fruits that befit repentance." That may be why at least some of them were so happy. Happiness comes, you see, from repenting of what we know to be wrong and turning ourselves in the direction of what we know to be right. That was the scene at Rockefeller Center. And perhaps that is why those people were all so happy.

John, you see, had told them to be good to each other: share your clothing and food, be fair, don't rob or steal, and stop complaining. Sometimes we hear only the harsh words of condemnation that John spoke: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath

to come?” But we must always remember that many of those who heard themselves condemned by John were moved to mend their ways. In their case, it was a matter of awaiting the coming of the Messiah. In our case, it’s a matter of awaiting the coming of Christmas.

That’s what I saw in the scene at Rockefeller Center—happy and expectant people, most all of them either awaiting the coming of Christmas or glad that others were. I saw native New Yorkers offer to take the picture of Japanese and Russian tourists. I saw a young woman stop to buy a hot pretzel for a bag lady. I actually saw two people bump into each other, and both of them say, “I’m sorry.” Can you believe that? Two people in New York saying, “I’m sorry?” Wow! You know they’re trying to make sure they’re on Santa’s list. I saw a teenage boy holding the arm of a woman who had to be his grandmother. Do you know how I know that? Because he wasn’t embarrassed by it. And he wasn’t faking it, either. You know when teenagers are embarrassed. Or when they’re phony. They can’t conceal it. This kid wasn’t embarrassed. He was genuine. He held his grandmother’s arm and squired her all around the upper perimeter of the skating rink. I watched them both, closely. For him, she was at that moment the only woman in the world; and for her, he was the finest grandson ever to grace the planet earth. He’d heard and heeded the Baptist’s warning. He didn’t need Abraham as his father. He had his grandmother.

And then there was the skating rink itself, below from where I stood. It wasn’t as crowded as I’ve sometimes seen it in the past, but neither had it changed in any substantial way. It was still populated by that kind of diverse crowd that only New York can produce. The multitudes always gather at Rockefeller Center to prepare for Christmas, just as they once gathered by the River Jordan to prepare for Christ. There were families and couples and single folks, all mixed together and all an equal part of the group. No matter their status in life, they were all there as equals, all doing the same thing. True, some of them did it better than others, and some of them looked better than others; but below the levels of appearance and ability there was a common spirit that bound them all together. They were skaters. Not white, or black, or brown, or red, or yellow skaters; just skaters. They were young, and old, and ageless. Some skated beautifully. And they were applauded. Others skated awfully. And they were helped. Some were dressed in Fifth Avenue finery—fur coat, fur hat, fur muffler and all. Some wore what you know had to be the absolute latest and most up-to-date in skating tights and tutus. (Those are the ones who we in our family say are engaged in “costume sports.”) But most people just wore plain old street clothes. They were the masses. And they knew that the skating rink belonged to them just as much as it belonged to the rich and fancy folks.

And so I watched it all from my perch above the rink. I saw one girl fall repeatedly, always to be lifted up by her friend. I saw three boys skating together, two beautifully and one awfully. The two coached the one. I even saw a father put his arms around his shivering child. Sometimes, you know, a hug is warmer than a coat. Helping and teaching and hugging and smiling. That is what I saw at Rockefeller Center.

God speaks in many ways. It’s not the manner of his speaking that matters. What matters is if we hear him—and answer him. John the Baptist said you’d be ready to meet the Messiah if you repented of your selfish, sinful ways and began a new life of sharing and honesty. That remains the message of Advent to this day. You can’t avoid the commercial glitz of our contemporary

Christmas. It's here to stay. Just like Rockefeller Center. But what you can do is resolve to live, amid that glitz, a life of sharing, helping, caring, teaching, and healing.

So go find a skating rink. And when you do, remember to smile. After all, you never know when some preacher may see a sermon in you.

Amen.

This sermon was preached by the Reverend Douglas E. Remer in Saint John's Church, Tampa, Florida, on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2009.

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