

**Advent 1 - Dec. 2 2018**  
**A way out of the Maze**  
**Luke 3 - John the Baptist**

I have a story to tell you.

It's the story of something that happened to me on one of our mission trips to West Virginia.

Not recently - it was a long while back.

But it's stuck with me ever since.

Because it's a parable, really, my own little parable.

And I decided that this Sunday,

this first Sunday of Advent, was the right Sunday to share it.

So here's the story.

It was maybe a Wednesday on our week with the Appalachia Service Project.

And the ASP staff at our work center told us that evening that they had a game for us to play.

It's a challenge game, they said.

I'll be good at this, I thought to myself,

I mean -- running games for kids is what I do all the time.

So they led us outside, some seventy of us, teens and adults,

and they took us to a small clearing, surrounded by trees.

And there were all these ropes running from tree to tree across the little clearing,

an intricate pattern made from what had to be hundreds of feet of rope woven in and out, and all tied together in, like, this web.

"It's a game," the staff said again.

"This is a **maze** that you are going to have to find your way out of.

So, to start, everyone just go and grab hold of one of the ropes.

So we did.

All right, said the staff. We're just about ready.

There are just a few key rules.

First, you have to have your eyes closed the whole time.

Secondly -- they said -- you can't ever let go of the rope.

Also -- you can't speak to each other.

But - they said, if you need to ask **us** anything, your friendly ASP staff, just raise your hand.

And one of us will come take your hand and you can whisper your question to us. It has to be a yes or no question.

So, they said -- close your eyes and start!

So we did.

Eyes tight closed, we all started shuffling our way along the ropes, searching for the path out of the maze.

I was concentrating so hard --

I really, really wanted to be the first person out of the maze,  
I knew it was like one of those logic puzzles, and knew there had to be some clever trick to it.  
And I wanted to be the one who figured it out.

Time wore on.

It was not going as well as I'd hoped.

Every rope I followed just led to knots and knots and more ropes,  
and I couldn't figure out what the deal was with this.

Around me, I could hear other people whispering questions to the staff.

But I was not going to do that.

I would show no weakness.

I kept shuffling along the rope, eyes closed.

I was noticing something -- I was sensing fewer people around me.

It appeared that others must have discovered the way out.

Oh no. I was going to look - stupid.

And I hate looking stupid.

My hands, still clutching the rope, were sweaty with anxiety

A voice whispered in my ear. "Do you need help?" the voice asked.

"No," I said, mortified at being the object of someone's pity. "I can figure this out."

And I plodded along.

After a time, another voice whispered in my ear.

"You should ask for help," the voice said gently.

"Okay, okay," I said. I raised my hand.

A staffer took my hand so I could ask my question.

"Am I going the right direction?" I whispered.

"No," the person chuckled. Well, that was a big help, I thought.

I just stood, tears of frustration seeping from my closed eyes.

I could feel **no** other hands pulling on the ropes anymore.

I knew I must be alone on the maze.

I stood there a long, long time, head down,  
furious at myself for failing, confused, embarrassed.

"Ask for help," someone whispered again.

"Ask for help," whispered another.

Finally I raised my hand.

And again someone took it.

"Will you please," I said, "please help me?"

"Yes," she said. "That's all you needed to ask.

That's the way out of the maze.

Open your eyes."

I opened my eyes.

Of the seventy who had started,

I and one other person were the only ones still clutching the rope.

All that time, all I'd needed to do  
was to ask for help.

The way that anyone got out of that maze had nothing to do with figuring out the darn ropes  
and knots.

All anyone had to do to get out of that tangled mess  
was to humble themselves and ask for help.

And sixty-eight other people were able to do that before me,  
me and my stubborn pride.

I tell this story today, this maze story,  
because here's what I think: I think this is an **Advent** story.  
It's an Advent parable.

And now you're like - *what?*

What does this story have to do with getting ready for Christmas?

Because that's what Advent is, right?

Advent is when we get ready for Christmas:

we buy the gifts

and decorate the tree

and string the lights

and make the cookies.

All true, all true –

but Advent is about some inner work too, some *spirit* work.

Advent also means getting our hearts ready for Christmas,  
getting our souls ready for Jesus' arrival.

And the way we do *that* work is by taking a deep breath  
and admitting -- we need help.

Advent is when we swallow our pride,  
raise our hands, and ask for help.

What we are doing in Advent,  
one by one and all together,  
is admitting that we need some assistance.

Admitting that the end of the maze is beyond our own reach.

Admitting that we need someone to take our hand and show us the way.

Advent is when all humanity says to God,  
Help!

We humans really can't do this on our own.  
We need a Savior.  
We need God to be with us, we need God WITH us, we need Emmanuel.  
We need someone to show us the way.  
We need someone to bring us healing.  
Advent is all of us taking a deep breath,  
raising our hands and saying "*hey -- could use some help here.*"

That scripture that Seth just read to you  
is the scripture that always pops up in the church lectionary this time of year,  
the recommended bible readings for pastors and churches.

All this next week,  
people in churches all over will be hearing the story  
of this guy John the Baptist.  
He was Jesus' cousin,  
and kind of his advance man.  
John's role was simply to go around saying to people –  
hey, you need help.  
You need a Savior.  
And guess what - the good news is that He's coming.  
Help is on the way.  
That's what Advent says to us.  
Hey, guess what? He's coming.  
Help is on the way.

The **hard** part is asking for it.  
The hardest part about Advent is not untangling all those Christmas lights that you balled up  
and threw in a paper bag last January.  
No, the real challenge of Advent is getting your heart untangled,  
getting your spirit ready, really ready --  
by being willing to ask for help.  
Look at me in that darn maze.  
All I had to do was raise my hand and ask for help.  
I couldn't do it.

There's a pastor out in Colorado that I've mentioned to you before,  
a Lutheran woman pastor named Nadia Bolz Weber.  
Her church is known as the Church for All Sinners and Saints,  
and she makes sure that everyone, everyone knows that they are welcome there.  
And the reason for that is that her journey to church, her journey to God,

started not in a church sanctuary  
but in a church basement.  
That was where an AA meeting was being held  
that she stumbled – almost literally – into.  
That’s where she learned to ask for help.

She’d gone to an AA meeting because a friend had told her she was an alcoholic, and Nadia just wanted to prove her wrong.

So she sat there at that meeting,  
on an old sofa in the corner of that church basement,  
looking for the affirmation that she wasn’t actually supposed to be there.  
Instead, she discovered that she was probably in the right place.

And she kept going back.

The only thing that rubbed her the wrong way was how everyone talked about God so much.  
Nadia really hated Christianity,  
because she’d grown up being told about a God who was always disappointed in her, always judging her.

She didn’t see what this God was going to do for her.

Then one day, one of her AA friends said this:

“Stop thinking about it so much, Nadia.

When you get up in the morning, just ask God to help keep you sober.

And when you go to bed at night, thank him.”

So she did.

She tried asked for help. She asked God for help.

And, she said, what it felt like was that I had been on this path toward self-destruction,  
and God reached down, pulled me off of it by the scruff of my collar,  
and plunked me down on an entirely different path.

It wasn’t a matter of *her* will, she says.

It was *God* giving her her life back.

Because -- with great reluctance -- she finally asked for help.

That may not be your story.

The help Nadia needed may not be the help you need -- or maybe it is.

But regardless, the truth is that all of us need help with *something*.

There’s something we could do better --

maybe faith that could be stronger,

or kindness or hope --

maybe there’s forgiveness we’ve been struggling with,

or patience that eludes us.

Maybe we could just be doing more, or doing better.  
There's something each of us needs help with.

We have a little over three weeks until we celebrate Christmas;  
four Sundays together,  
and then a burst of candles and Christmas trees and carols and joy.  
So, by all means, use these three weeks to be joyful,  
to delight in the season, to celebrate and rejoice.  
But try this, try this too:  
Use these weeks also to think about your needs, your deepest desires,  
your own longing for healing.  
Use the time ahead to ask for help.  
Prayerfully, earnestly, open and honestly,  
raise your hand and ask for help.

Because help is on the way. It's on the way.  
The angels are tuning their harps,  
the shepherds are heading for the hillside with their sheep,  
and a young weary couple is beginning their walk toward Bethlehem.

Help is on the way. **He** is on the way.  
Just ask.

Amen.