

This way ... Advent 1 2020

Last Sunday afternoon, we had some of the most fun we've had at church in all of 2020.

That sounds like a low bar. Let me re-state.

Last Sunday, we had some of the most fun we've had here ever.

And even though I just said "here" and "at church", we were actually all over Fairfield last Sunday.

Here's the back story.

Every year since forever, this church has put on a Christmas Pageant.

Because of course. That's what we do.

How could it be December without kids dressed in angel costumes and donkey costumes and Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus.

But what do you do when it's 2020

and you can't bring dozens and dozens of kids up here on our little stage all crowded together.

You do what we're doing.

You make a Christmas Pageant video,
and you film the kids in small groups, Covid-careful,
outside, with masks.

So, we are now in production with the 2020 Pageant video,
which we plan to air on Christmas Eve.

I don't want this sermon to be any kind of spoiler,

but I can tell you that last Sunday afternoon

we were filming all over town

with third graders in Shepherd costumes

and fourth grade angels

and fourth and fifth grade Wise People –Kings and Queens.

And it was, as previously stated,
some of the most fun ever.

The one moment I want to share with you in this sermon
involved a scene where our Shepherds are on their long walk to find the
manger.

This long arduous walk, in our interpretation,
takes them across the stone bridge down on Sturges Road,
you know the one, by the Mill River wetlands area.

So we all parked down there,
and we lined up all our angels along the bridge
to point the way for the shepherds.

And as the shepherds came into view,
the angels raised their arms,
and their wings, and dutifully pointed the way.

A dozen four-foot-tall angels pointing the way across the Sturges bridge.

Needless to say, cars passing by slowed down for this.

And uniformly, you could see smiles spreading across the driver's faces
as they, unexpectedly, found themselves following
directions given by angels.

They *thought* they were just headed up Bronson Road,
but instead,

they discovered that they were being directed by angels towards the baby
Jesus.

“Look at how happy we’re making people!” said one of our kids.

And yes, we were.

Seeing angels pointing the way definitely made people happy.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent,
the season leading us toward Christmas.
And Advent is all *about* pointing the way,

getting us re-oriented in the right direction.
Advent says hey, in case you've gotten off track,
in case you've forgotten what's most important,
let me point you towards a little baby in a manger.
Let me show you where Love has been born.
Look this way, says Advent, look this way.

That's why the traditional scripture readings for this time of year
all have to do with pointing the way.

Like the Isaiah scripture that David began our worship with:
"Make the path clear in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord."

And Jesus' cousin always makes an appearance in Advent readings,
that scripture that David just read for you.

Jesus' cousin was John the Baptist,
who was famous for, yes, baptizing people
(hence the name)

but mostly famous for leading people to Jesus,
pointing the way.

Like our little angels lined up on the Sturges Road bridge,
saying *this way to Jesus*,

John the Baptist's main role was to let people know that someone amazing
was on the way.

John was this kind of wild strange guy -
the Bible said he lived out in the wilderness,
and ate locusts and honey for his snacks.

And his sermons were definitely intense —
his main theme was "hey, your lives are a mess,
and you really need help."

But he'd always end on an up note.

John the Baptist said "yes, things are a mess, and yes, you need some help,

but boy are you in luck.
Because my cousin is this guy Jesus of Nazareth,
and he has come to make things right.
And to make you right with God.

That's why, whenever you stumble across a painting of John the Baptist
in any art museum,
he's always pointing a finger,
always pointing to someone outside the frame of the painting –
He's pointing to Jesus, is what the painter wanted you to remember.
That was his job. To point towards Jesus.

And what I'm thinking, in this Advent season,
is that that's *our* job, too.
To point toward Jesus. To point the way to the manger.
Like John the Baptist
and like our angels last Sunday on the bridge.

It seems like every other op-ed column I read these days
talks about the way forward.
What's the way forward for our country.
what's the way forward for us as a people,
what's the way forward for us as churches, as people of faith?

And here's the thing.
We actually *know* the way.
Oh, I don't mean that we know all the answers,
any one of us.
But we do actually know the way.

Our job, like John the Baptist's,
like our angels on the bridge,

is to point it out.
To point the way towards hope.
To be signposts towards healing.
To be big neon highway arrows pointing towards the way of Love.

We're the ones to say "this way, this way ..."
Wherever it is you want to go,
taking the way of Love is the only way to get there.

That's our job.
Pointing the way.

Earlier this week, our community lost someone who was both widely admired and greatly loved.
Captain Harry Ackley, of the Fairfield Fire Department,
had served this town in any number of ways,
and had mentored and led a couple generations of public servants.
David and I knew him best for what he did for us almost 20 years ago,
after 9/11.
For us, he pointed the way,
pointed the way toward Love.

After 9/11, Captain Ackley had thrown himself into the work of recovery and healing in New York.
In the months after the towers fell, he was in the city constantly,
helping wherever he could.
Meanwhile, here at Greenfield Hill,
we'd received an extraordinary anonymous grant of funds to find and help those who were hurting and being overlooked.
So we asked for Harry Ackley's help.
In his work in the city, where he was doing all he could to follow the way of love,

he had encountered a community of great hurt and need – the families of those who had been the waitstaff at Windows on the World, at the top of the North Tower.

Many came from the same neighborhood in Queens, now devastated by grief and hardship.

Captain Ackley pointed us toward them, pointed us along the path of love and healing and hope.

And he was standing beside us as we gathered with them in a little Catholic church and offered the care of this church.

David and I have been remembering that moment this week.

Remembering how Harry, always dedicated to serving, had followed the way of love into the city to offer himself.

And remembering how he then had pointed us along that way.

He had served for us as a signpost.

He had showed us which way to go to do God's work of hope.

That's a pretty remarkable story, yes.

But what's at the center of it is something that we're all capable of.

We are *all* capable of choosing paths that lead toward healing.

And we are all capable of being the ones who point the way for others.

We are all capable of being the angels on the bridge who say "this way" toward the manger.

Let me say it again: that's our job.

We who have already caught sight of the manger,

we who have already seen the star in the sky,

we *know* the way.

Our job, like John the Baptist's, like our angels on the bridge, is to point it out.

To live lives that point the way towards hope.
To be signposts towards healing.
And to lead people down the path of compassion.

In this Advent, this is our calling.
Prepare the way of the Lord, says the scripture –
and we say Yes.

Amen.