

# REPLACING PLYWOOD

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2015

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **“The Messiah” Competes with “Godspell”**

The theme for this morning is the notion of “Prepare ye the way of the Lord” (Handel’s “Messiah” from the KJV). I’ve been thinking about this all week, and I’ve had “Godspell” on my mind constantly. Then “Make straight in the desert a highway for our God” “. . . and the rough places plain,” and I get Handel’s “Messiah” competing with “Godspell.”

## **The Importance of Preparation**

I want to give you four examples of the critical importance of preparation to let this idea sink in because for me at least it doesn’t sink in very easily.

### **1. Preparation for Paving a Road.**

Riverside Drive has been under repair for two years! It’s only a couple miles long, but the construction workers were doing a lot of stuff underneath the road-bed. Sewage stuff, wiring stuff, plumbing stuff, underlayment of the road stuff. The final paving took only four days! Two years of prep that you don’t see anymore. But things work now, and things flow, which is sort of important, and only four days of actual paving, the part that we see.  
*Preparation.*

### **2. Preparation for Painting a Kitchen.**

As you know, I used to

have a painting and roofing contracting business when I was in seminary, and there were a couple times when I was asked to paint a kitchen.

Now a kitchen has a film of oil on every surface. I don’t care how clean your kitchen is, if you have been cooking in it, there is a film of oil, which latex paint doesn’t like. So you have to clean the kitchen, and you have to clean it again. You have to clean it really, really well. I’m not talking about scraping, any of that kind of stuff.

Having the surface prepared before you paint is super-important. I know what happens if you don’t attend to preparation. The paint looks fine as you go along, but you go back an hour later, and it has separated from the surface. By this time the paint is dry, and you’re in big trouble. *Preparation.*

### **3. Preparation for a Sermon.**

For a preacher there is such a thing as the Saturday-night special sermon. Things happen during the week, often related to a funeral, but things happen that don’t give

you a chance to prepare your Sunday sermon.

I can spot a Saturday-night special a mile away. I'm pretty sure you can too. But thinking about the topic, doing some of the research, digging into the Bible, applying it to what is happening in our lives — those kinds of things make a sermon worth listening to, and you can tell when that didn't happen. *Preparation.*

- 4. Preparation for Laying a New Roof.** I also used to do some roofing, and sometimes the homeowner would want me to do what's called a tear-off. Instead of just tacking a new roof on top of the old one, they want the old one taken off. So you go in there with your spades and crowbars and all that kind of equipment, and you start taking off the old roof. Then there are a zillion nails that you want to make sure are also removed.

But now you come across the plywood. The reason you're replacing this roof is ostensibly because the old one had a leak. And so you're walking across this roof, and you come to a piece of plywood that is spongy. There used to be a leak in that area — very minor, but it allowed some water to get into the plywood and to begin the rotting process. Once in a while, your foot goes through it. So out goes the call,

“Where's Joe?” “Well, he's in the attic.”

So you've got to tear off that piece of plywood and replace it with new. Then you put on the underlayment, and then finally you're able to put on the new roof. Putting on the new roof is the minor part of the job. The major part is the preparation underneath that's not sexy, that you don't see, but it is more important than what you can see. *Preparation.*

### **How Do We Prepare for Christmas?**

I'm talking about in your heart, in your soul. I'm not talking about decorating the tree. I'm not talking about travel plans that you may have. Not talking about social engagements. Not talking about your shopping list. But more at the level of the soul, at the level of theology. How do we prepare?

I'd like to offer two suggestions at this time. This is December 13, and even though this is the third Sunday, we're about halfway through Advent at this point. The first suggestion has to do with “What to do,” and the second one has to do with “How to be.”

- 1. What to Do.** There's a marvelous, very small section of scripture that tells about Mary. She had been visited by shepherds, who were sort of freaking out. They had had a vision of angels who had given them a message. And so they hustled down into the town of Bethlehem from where they were up on the hillside, and they find Mary and give her the message. She hears that message and she ponders it in her heart.

There's a similar one after Mary is met by the Three Wise Men. They bring gifts of frankincense and gold and myrrh, which are unusual gifts to give a young family with a baby. She ponders these things also in her heart.

What I'd like to suggest to you is that, in the midst of busy-ness all around you, take a little time to ponder.

Theologically, the core theme of Christmas is an incarnation. So you've got God touching humanity. You've got Spirit touching flesh. You've got heaven touching earth. So it is a deeply spiritual, deeply meaningful kind of thing. But what I would like you to consider is this notion of the togetherness of heaven and earth, of Spirit and flesh, of God and human.

What does that mean for you? Does it in any way affect your life?

I'd like to offer one other, deeper question about it, and that is: Was Jesus just a supremely lucky example of this togetherness? Or is it something that is happening in your life now and you are becoming more aware of its manifestation in your life as it was manifested in the life of the Christ?

I offer that merely as an example of something worthy of your pondering in the midst of the busy-ness all around you.

**2. How to Be.** The second suggestion has to do with something to be. All of you have been watching the news, and you are acutely aware, unless you're brain dead, that there is turmoil and strife in our world right now. Between the races, between the religions, between the rich and the poor. It's almost like you could choose a category, and there's a level of strife with another category, however we look at humanity. And it's deeply disturbing.

And so the second suggestion is to be compassionate in who you are as a person and in the interactions you have with other people. Nothing more. Just you and your interactions.

### **The Etymology of Compassion**

"Compassion" has an interesting etymology. In Latin, "com" means "with," and then follows the "passion," which means, well, passion, emotion, feeling.

It's virtually identical to a Greek word with almost exactly the same kind of etymology. The word is "sympathy." From the Greek, the "sym" prefix means "with" and then the "pathos" once again means feeling emotion. So you have "sympathy," which is to feel with another person. "Compassion" is to have the same kind of emotion, passion, feeling with another person. "Empathy" means to feel into, the "em" kind of prefix. And so an empathetic person can feel into another person.

While I'm at it, there's another etymology that is extraordinary. The word is "companion." The "com" means "with," and the "pan" is bread. So a companion is somebody with whom you break bread. Compassion is somebody with whom you feel. Any of these expressions would make a valuable part of your character.

### **Preparation: Ponderment & Compassion**

In the middle of last week, Tracy left for work at 6:30 a.m. one morning, and promptly discovered she had a flat tire. She didn't discover it as fast as I would have liked, but she did discover it, called me, and promptly came back home. No problem. I let her take the other car and off she went to work, and then I pulled the car with the flat up to the garage, where I've got a little compressor, and took care of the tire.

At the risk of making myself look good, I did something important for a compassionate person. That is to intellectualize what it is like to put yourself into another's shoes. What would have happened if a single mom living in an apartment had a flat tire, where there isn't another car to go to work with in the wings. And there isn't a garage with a little compressor. And there isn't another person there to call and say, "Help me out." And there are little kids that you need to watch over while you're trying to do this. And if I were to come in late because I had a

flat tire, I don't have a boss or coworkers who are going to be upset but rather would be compassionate with me. What if she doesn't have any of those things?

And when you go down that road in your mind, it enters your heart and becomes compassion because you have now *felt with* the other person.

And as a society, an American society, we need to do that with the Mexican at the border. With the black person, with the Muslim. Between the rich and the poor. All of those animosities will benefit from some healing with compassion that starts in our heart but also in our mind by going down that road.

Let me conclude. There's a wonderful Christmas hymn, "O Holy Night." It's not in our hymnal. It's not in our old hymnal. And it's not in the other one that I'm allowed to photocopy, either. I was going to choose it for today. Here's one of the verses: "O holy night, the stars are brightly shining, it is the night of our dear Savior's birth. ¶ Long lay the world in sin and error pining, 'til he appeared and the soul felt its worth."

It's that last phrase that caught my attention. If you want the soul to feel its worth, ponder and be compassionate.

In other words, do your preparation.

*Amen.*