

"The Gift of the Tree: Purpose"

Luke 3:7-10; Luke 3:10-10

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

December 20, 2015 – 4th Sunday of Advent – Rev. Ronald Botts

In the comic strip "Peanuts" Lucy asks Linus, "What's the purpose of life?" Linus looks at her for a moment but says nothing. She asks again, this time more emphatically. "What's the purpose of life?" Linus holds out his blanket to her, as if to say, "Life is security."

Well, Lucy isn't satisfied with this half-answer, so she turns to a second person. "Charlie Brown," she poses, "what is the purpose of life?" Now Charlie proceeds to lay out a whole string of moralisms in response to her question. "Be kind. Don't smoke. Always be prompt. Smile a lot. Eat sensibly. Avoid too much sun. Send overseas packages early. Love all creatures. Insure all belongings, and try to keep the ball low."

Lucy stares incredulously at Charlie Brown before finally responding, "Hold still, for I am about to hit you a very sharp blow on the nose."

She now turns to Schroeder who is playing on his little piano. "What is the purpose of life?," she inquires. "What's it all about?" Schroeder stops playing, immediately throws up his arms, and exclaims, "Beethoven! Beethoven is it, clear and simple." To which Lucy can only respond in exasperation, "Good grief."

Now we have no idea what led Lucy to raise this question in the first place, except that it's kind of like her. Things pop into her head and she just has to have an answer. As to this question, she goes away totally frustrated. We can identify with her. It's a question that we also struggle with. "What's life about? What is its purpose? What is my purpose?"

Sometimes, just about the time we think we have a satisfactory answer, things change in our lives and we have to rethink the question all over again. Without something we can believe in, we're like a boat without a rudder. When you don't know your purpose, it's hard to have a direction. Without a direction, it's hard to know what to do from day to day.

This is one of humanity's most basic questions. It's an old one, yet is new to each generation and to every person. "How do I know if I'm making the best use of my life if I don't know what destiny I'm here to fulfill?"

On two prior Sundays here in Advent we've considered the common tree as lifted up in our New Testament lessons. Trees lend themselves well to illustration. Take something as obvious as growth. A child and a sapling have many similarities. They can both grow straight and tall, but they can also be misshapen or even broken by the winds of adversity.

Trees are so commonplace, however, that we don't think how important they really are. If we were to lose every tree on the earth due to some catastrophe, the result would be truly devastating. A total absence of trees would likely lead to the end of humanity. Our lives and theirs are that intertwined.

Trees purify the air we breathe. They hold the soil together and keep it from eroding. From trees come fruit, nuts, and syrup; timber for construction; paper for books and magazines; and scores of other products we take for granted. Trees have a purpose.

So, as well, human beings have purpose. That is the implication of Jesus' words in today's Gospel: "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Here he applies this observation to the family tree of Israel planted by Abraham. This tree, like all, began small but had grown to be huge. Still, while growing large, it wasn't producing much of the good fruit it was created for and of which it was capable.

Jesus said sadly that if that tree would not fulfill its purpose—as magnificent as it was—it would be cut down, thrown into the fire, and its ashes would be used to fertilize future generations that would better serve God's purpose. Jesus told God's chosen ones that now is the point of decision: you must either produce or you will cease to exist. You have a purpose and destiny, but you are failing to fulfill your potential.

Now here we are today in December. It's the season of Advent—the season of preparation and waiting and expectation—the end of the lunar calendar but the beginning of the Christian year. It's also an appropriate time to look inward, at ourselves, to ask anew what our purpose is and to consider how we are fulfilling it.

We go through the seemingly endless routine of daily living-- getting up, getting dressed, going away to work or staying home to work, eating, running from here to there, relaxing, sleeping—but what does it all mean? To what end or purpose do we exist? Lucy's question today becomes our question as well.

Advent is first of all a reverse journey from where we are now to Bethlehem of long ago. It is a glance backward to find one who might shed light on our life. From there, it pushes us forward on our own pilgrimage. It leads to new discoveries, new truths, new resources. It is a journey we never totally finish until life closes upon us. In its simplest form it is to walk the path of life with Jesus at our side, and to learn and grow from our close companion.

The truth is that we can never adequately answer that essential question, "What is the purpose of my life?" at a distance from our Creator. People regularly try to do that but, apart from its connection with all life, it has no context. Only when you grasp God's greater purpose for the entirety of creation, can you begin to discover what is God's purpose for your life. Advent is an appropriate time to stop and look and consider.

The birth of Christ is the way that God chose to reveal the reason and purpose for the world. Through this God sought to bring individual lives into purposeful activity that humanity might then produce the full harvest of its intended destiny.

According to today's text the people asked John the Baptist if the time of repentance is truly upon us, what should we do? He said, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." And he told them other things of this sort.

The people saw John and realized him to be a prophet of God. They even wondered whether he might be the long-awaited Messiah, but John sensed this and answered "I baptize you

with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals. He will be the one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Soon we, too, will affirm the arrival of this prophesized One in Jesus of the manger.

One of the characters in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* makes this observation: "The secret of a [person's] being is not only to live, but also to have something to live for." We are born to discover our unique direction in life, but we look in vain when we search for it apart from Jesus. If we are alert and aware in this year, then his purpose will help us find our purpose.