

I have been really wrestling with how to speak about Advent this year and how to contextualize its insistent call to prepare for the coming of Jesus (2<sup>nd</sup> coming of adult Jesus, not baby Jesus.)

You have likely been part of enumerable past sermons where the preacher will tell you to slow down, pray more, and let go of all the busyness in December. In 2020, when we are all spending enormous time *not* running around in the Christmas shuffle, I have been stumped. I am wrestling with what God wants *me to be* and *us to hear* in December. I think preparing-the-way-of-the-Lord starts with us sticking our neck out for each other. Without the “I-should-be-more-kind” shame, we can be a bloodhound sniffing for the trail of grace. Let’s try and occasionally to find ways to expand our generosity and mercy. Maybe in 2020, this is how we get ready for adult Jesus and not beat ourselves into shopping less. (*You probably noticed that this Gospel is not usually located on the first Sunday of Advent. This was my choice.*)

I want you to know that I have struggled with sticking my neck out regarding St. Timothy’s reopening. Inertia and caution pull me to wait until a vaccine. In a blinding flash of the obvious, you know that a closed campus is easier to manage than an open one. In early November after the diocese gave a green in to reopening inside, many fellow clergy decided to stay shut until a vaccine or the summer (which was/is the right call for their context. It “purple” tier happens to St. Timothy’s by mandate. However, for me, sticking my neck out to pry open the campus, even if unsuccessfully, has been *spiritual practice*. Contra Costa and COVID is out of our control, but the work, the struggle to create community, is not.

**The Gospel** Here is what I want you take away from the famous Good Samaritan story. The religious people who walked by the injured man *weren’t wrong*. To focus on their terrible behavior is to be distracted from the surprising, generous, neck-sticking-out way of Jesus as described by the Good Samaritan. You already know that Samaritans were considered no-good, compromised and dirty. What you didn’t know it that no one would blame the priest for walking by; he had a job to do. Then and now the hearers might wish the others had stopped, but the priest and Levite weren’t wrong.

The story below has become a top ten favorite of mine. Don’t hear me chiding you to stop to help on the roadside. You are right to worry about safety. You are right to think everyone should have AAA. You are right to worry about the well-being of your passengers if you were to stop and help. **But** hear how graceful, generous and merciful this family was. Hear God saying we can be like them. Preparing the way of the Lord is not driven by guilt, but by a worldview that God lives in the hands of those who choose to stick their necks out.

### **The Tire Iron and the Tamale**

*By Justin Horner March 4, 2011*

During this past year I’ve had three instances of car trouble: a blowout on a freeway, a bunch of blown fuses and an out-of-gas situation. They all happened while I was driving other people’s cars, which for some reason makes it worse on an emotional level. And on a practical level as well, what with the fact that I carry things like a jack and extra fuses in my own car, and know enough not to park on a steep incline with less than a gallon of fuel.

Each time, when these things happened, I was disgusted with the way people didn’t bother to help. I was stuck on the side of the freeway hoping my friend’s roadside service would show, just watching tow trucks cruise past me. The people at the gas stations where I asked for a gas can told me that they couldn’t lend them out “for safety reasons,” but that I could buy a really crappy one-gallon can, with no cap, for \$15. It was enough to make me say stuff like “this country is going to hell in a handbasket,” which I actually said.

But you know who came to my rescue all three times? Immigrants. Mexican immigrants. None of them spoke any English. One of those guys stopped to help me with the blowout even though he had his whole family of four in tow. I was on the side of the road for close to three hours with my friend's big Jeep. I put signs in the windows, big signs that said, "NEED A JACK," and offered money. Nothing. Right as I was about to give up and start hitching, a van pulled over, and the guy bounded out.

He sized up the situation and called for his daughter, who spoke English. He conveyed through her that he had a jack but that it was too small for the Jeep, so we would need to brace it. Then he got a saw from the van and cut a section out of a big log on the side of the road. We rolled it over, put his jack on top and we were in business.

I started taking the wheel off, and then, if you can believe it, I broke his tire iron. It was one of those collapsible ones, and I wasn't careful, and I snapped the head clean off. Damn. No worries: he ran to the van and handed it to his wife, and she was gone in a flash down the road to buy a new tire iron. She was back in 15 minutes. We finished the job with a little sweat and cussing (the log started to give), and I was a very happy man.

The two of us were filthy and sweaty. His wife produced a large water jug for us to wash our hands in. I tried to put a 20 in the man's hand, but he wouldn't take it, so instead I went up to the van and gave it to his wife as quietly as I could. I thanked them up one side and down the other. I asked the little girl where they lived, thinking maybe I'd send them a gift for being so awesome. She said they lived in Mexico. They were in Oregon so Mommy and Daddy could pick cherries for the next few weeks. Then they were going to pick peaches, then go back home.

After I said my goodbyes and started walking back to the Jeep, the girl called out and asked if I'd had lunch. When I told her no, she ran up and handed me a tamale.

This family, undoubtedly poorer than just about everyone else on that stretch of highway, working on a seasonal basis where time is money, took a couple of hours out of their day to help a strange guy on the side of the road while people in tow trucks were just passing him by.

But we weren't done yet. I thanked them again and walked back to my car and opened the foil on the tamale (I was starving by this point), and what did I find inside? My \$20 bill! I whirled around and ran to the van and the guy rolled down his window. He saw the \$20 in my hand and just started shaking his head no. All I could think to say was, "Por favor, por favor, por favor," with my hands out. The guy just smiled and, with what looked like great concentration, said in English: "Today you, tomorrow me."

Then he rolled up his window and drove away, with his daughter waving to me from the back. I sat in my car eating the best tamale I've ever had, and I just started to cry. It had been a rough year; nothing seemed to break my way. This was so out of left field I just couldn't handle it.

In the several months since then I've changed a couple of tires, given a few rides to gas stations and once drove 50 miles out of my way to get a girl to an airport. I won't accept money. But every time I'm able to help, I feel as if I'm putting something in the bank

As we move through Advent, let's prepare the way of the Lord. *Today you, tomorrow me.* You're not wrong to play it safe, but where can you stick your neck out today? The kingdom of God is there.

**Todd**