

“Moving Mountains” / Luke 3:1-6 / 9 December 2012

That wild-eyed prophet of the desert, John the Baptist! He always shows up on the second Sunday in Advent. And his words are always the same. “Prepare the way. Make straight God’s path. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.” It’s a sacred task, this thing of building roads across the waste places that separate us from each other. We could put Penn DOT on the job, and they would park their trucks in our lot for years, but never get it done. It takes love to move mountains.

Years ago, at a meeting of Lake Erie Presbytery, a retired professor of New Testament Greek stood up to preach. And he shared with us this story, a parable about the mostly imaginary distances that separate people from each other: Early one morning at the Jersey Shore, I slipped away from our hotel to watch the sun rising over the Atlantic Ocean. The old joke says that Delaware has three counties at low tide and two counties at high tide. New Jersey’s no different; when the tide goes out, it adds many square miles to the Garden State. And the tide was out that morning. The ocean had retreated far into the distance. The vacant lifeguard towers were stranded hundreds of feet from the water. An elderly woman was out there, practicing her yoga, but otherwise, I was alone on the beach, walking out where the ocean floor was exposed to the rising sun. Out on the sand, the receding waves had left little puddles here and there, miniature outposts of that big, wild ocean. And in those puddles I saw the tiniest of sea creatures swimming around, floating, staring up at the morning sky.

So I stopped and knelt in the sand beside one of those puddles, and I interviewed the sea creatures that were living inside. I said, “Good morning, friends. What a life you have here on the beach, with ocean waves raging just a few yards away! How long have you been here?” “Oh,” replied one of the sea creatures, a little pompously, “Ours is an ancient civilization. We have inhabited this very spot for ages and ages. Why, we’ve been living here ever since the tide went out!” I was a little puzzled by that answer, but I didn’t wish to offend the small creatures, so I changed the subject. I said, “It looks like there are many more of you living in all the other puddles up and down the beach. Do you all know each other? Do your children play soccer and softball with each other?” “My goodness, no!” they replied. “Those *other* creatures in those *other* puddles! Why, they’re nothing like us at all! Their world is very small. And they’re so narrow. Consider that other puddle just behind you. It’s only 9” wide! Our puddle is 11” and a quarter!” A little bewildered again, but not wishing to offend, I said, “I see, but it looks like you have many things in common!” The sea creatures did not like this observation at all. They protested all the more loudly, “No! Those other creatures are not only narrow; they’re shallow, too! Why, their puddle is only 3” deep. Ours is 4” and three quarters!”

I could see that the conversation was going nowhere. And so I bade farewell to the small creatures in their little puddle. And as I strolled back toward the hotel, I heard the waves of that great, endless ocean crashing behind me. I looked back to see that the tide was coming in. The beach was getting smaller, as the great ocean drew nearer and nearer. As the water rose, each of those little puddles was engulfed and disappeared, swallowed up by that one great ocean, where all its creatures had to share one vast home, where all the small puddle creatures would look pretty much the same beside the whales, and the jellyfish, and the barracudas, and the sharks. And I said to myself, “Rise, O tides of this world, rise!”

The bridging of distances! It's one of the oldest, most desperate desires of the prophets and sages of every place and every faith. The bridging of distances between social classes, between races, between nations, between generations, between faith traditions, between political parties. Sometimes it's hard even to bridge the distances between yourself and people you care about...like when I pull a perfume bottle out of the hope basket and have to preach a children's sermon about it. Or when my daughter, Greta, asks me to tell her what "air quotes" mean. Sometimes we want very much to bridge the distance and create closeness and understanding. Sometimes, like the tiny sea creatures in the parable, we don't even have the good sense to care. But if there is ever going to be a way forward for our churches, our nations, and our world, we must at last reach out to each other across the seemingly vast distances.

Do you remember that 1990 song by Oleta Adams? "You can reach me by railway. You can reach me by Trailways. You can reach me on an airplane. You can reach me by caravan. Cross the desert like an Arab man. I don't care how you get here. Get here if you can. There are hills and mountains between us, always something to get over." Her sentiment isn't so different from the one that echoes through at least four different books of the Bible, and through the lyrics of some of our civilization's best music, like Handel's *Messiah*. "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain." From those homesick exiles in the Book of Isaiah—longing for far-off Jerusalem—to the grizzled old hermit at the beginning of the gospels—John the Baptist—the words are the same. Let there be a way across all the things that separate us. Let us be united to each other again. Fill in the valleys! Build a level road. Move the mountains. It takes love to move mountains.

Real mountains don't just grow overnight. They develop over long centuries of time. When the Alleghenies rose up out of a vast primordial ocean, they were taller than the Rockies. Nowadays, they're little more than hills, but that's because they're so old. Geologists believe that it's taken about 445 million years for erosion to wear them down to their current height. A visitor from Switzerland or Tibet wouldn't even call them mountains; the much taller mountains in those lands are far younger. Moving mountains is not an easy business; it takes years. Many of the mountains that separate us from other people are longstanding. Consider the divides that stand between Russia and America. Our nations are no longer enemies, really, but we're still not feeling the love. Consider the even older divides between Arabs and all westerners. Those divisions are older than the crusades and far older than the first Gulf War. Consider the divides that stand between Jew and Christian, Protestant and Catholic. Black, white, Latino. Some of the mountains between us have taken centuries to develop. Either those mountains are very old and firmly established, or else we—like those tiny sea creatures—labor under such small perspectives that the mountains seem a lot older and bigger than they really are. Consider, too, the many ways we've all seen those seemingly impassable mountains crumble. All it takes is a simple expression of concern. A gesture of respect, a smile. Words of kindness can leap those tall mountains in a single bound. We've seen it done. At our Interfaith Thanksgiving service, when Bower Hill Presbyterians worship alongside not only Lutherans—which was not always possible—but also Catholics, and Jews! For 46 years! We've seen real mountains moved...by love. It's the mere determination to treat others with respect and kindness, the simple choice to overlook differences and emphasize the things that we hold in common. Love moves mountains.

And if ever we needed the mountains to be moved, it is today! Far more troubling than the real, longstanding mountains of racial and religious bigotry are the new, artificial mountains that people are erecting to separate themselves from others. Consider the political gridlock here in our country today. Our politicians are so interested in their inflexible positions that the greater good is blithely pushed aside. Mountains of our own making, some of which really are molehills! Consider that there are Presbyterians here in our own city who are in such a hurry to disaffiliate with other Presbyterians over issues of human sexuality that they are willing to violate all the rules of civility and decency in order to do it. When I look at our own neighbors who are so rushed to break their fellowship with us, I wonder, what did we do to them? Don't leave on our account! Are we really so offensive? Here at Bower Hill, we mostly worship, and learn, and drink coffee...sometimes just decaf. We provide fresh produce for poor families on the North Side and clean water for Haiti. We welcome anyone who wants to bring their faith journey alongside ours. The only person on the face of the planet who could possibly be offended by us is someone who's almost-but-not-exactly like us, someone who is less interested in the bigger picture than in all the tiny details. How small our perspectives must be if we are to maintain that our little puddles are better than your puddles. From where God stands, I wonder how important our fine distinctions are. And someday, someday, that great ocean will surely overtake us all, and in its vast depths, we'll all look very much alike. Even now, a Theravada Buddhist from Cambodia could no more tell the difference between Bower Hill and our sister Presbyterian congregations than I can tell between Sunni Islam and Shiite Islam. Fear and bigotry construct false mountains. Vanity and tribal pride build unnecessary mountains. But love removes them.

In the 1980s, a lawyer invited the king of Jordan and the foreign minister of Israel to his London apartment for dinner. Israel and Jordan were enemies at the time, so the evening was a little bit strained. Just as the two guests were getting ready to leave, the host said, "Wait! Who's going to help me clean up?" And the king of Jordan and the foreign minister of Israel looked at each other in utter shock. Then they smiled, took off their jackets, and the king washed while the foreign minister dried. The lawyer had put them both into the same puddle, and they saw each other's humanity. The two men shared a common experience at the kitchen sink, and a better relationship was built. To this day, Jordan and Israel enjoy a kind of peace.

Oh, for a day when those who bridge distances will be our heroes, rather than those who deepen rifts and put up false mountains! Oh, for a day when our political and religious leaders will make straight God's path, which is the way of unity, not division! The roads of divisiveness would lead us up into those mountains, where we would lose our way and perish. But there's another way. The old promise stands. "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low." It might take years, but the things that stand between us will be moved. It really does happen here and there, now and then. It happens when we respect those who disagree with us. It happens when we entertain the possibility that our own perspective is limited. It happens when we decide that we've had enough fighting. Mountains of division come down when we decide they should, when we determine within ourselves that enough is enough, and we are going to seek a bigger perspective, the humanity of the other. Love is the thing that moves mountains in our world, and in our private relationships. In the end, love will surely be that one great ocean that swallows up our puddles. Rise, O tides of this world, rise! Amen.