

If you're from the Midwest what I'm about to describe may not sound all that strange, particularly if you have ever spent any time in my beloved Michigan. However, if the great white north has never been your cup of tea, this is going to sound slightly foreign to you, but today, I would like to introduce to you the concept of the Michigan Left. I even have a visual aid for you to visualize what I'm about to describe. I got this at the Detroit NYG and it makes me chuckle every time I wear it because I get a lot of puzzled looks.

So what to make of this weird and wonky street sign? This is Michigan's solution to two particular problems. You see we have a propensity to have a lot of divided highways which run through just regular, fairly busy towns and cities. In order to avoid number one, people attempting to go straight through the divided highway, thus crossing at least four lanes of traffic and the median, or to avoid number two people attempting to turn left on a divided highway, thus crossing two lanes of traffic and blocking the median, we have invented the Michigan left. You turn right, make a U-turn, and then turn right if you're going straight, or just make the U-turn and continue on straight if you were aiming to turn left. Confused yet? Believe me, attempting to explain this is not easy. Honestly, I never even really knew it was a thing that needed to be explained until I

moved out of Michigan and realized that something which I just naturally learned in drivers ed was not a thing in most states. If you are driving with a non-Michigander in the car and they see one of these signs, the perplexed look on their faces is kind of priceless. For people used to driving in Michigan, it's just a naturally occurring thing. You make a Michigan left, no questions asked, no perplexed look required.

As I was thinking about my sermon this week, this odd little driving conundrum popped into my head because I'm pretty sure it's the exact opposite of what John the Baptist is calling for in our gospel this morning. Now, for sure, John wasn't talking about driving rituals when he emerged on the banks of the Jordan, but what he was talking about was making crooked paths straight, something the Michigan left does not accomplish. If anything, the Michigan left is the epitome of what humanity tends to do when it comes to pretty much everything, especially the kingdom of God. We do no make crooked paths straight, we make crooked paths more crooked, and frankly often make straight paths as windy and complicated as humanly possible.

If last week didn't feel fully Adventy for you, what with the talk of the second coming and the visions of apocalypses it caused to dance in your heads, well then hopefully this week, Advent feels like it is in full swing.

John the Baptist does feel like the one who fully ushers in this waiting period as we anticipate Christ's coming, which makes sense since his job is to be the forerunner for Christ, announcing his coming into the world. So often though, we tend to get lost in the wild descriptions of John and his ministry, and we miss the actual words that he is calling out to people. We're so focused on all these people flocking to the Jordan to be baptized and the promise that this means Christ is near, that we miss just *why* exactly people are coming to the Jordan and *how* we are supposed to be preparing for Christ's arrival.

Somehow, for all the Advent wreaths you can find and the decorations bearing stars and words of hopeful anticipation, no one seems to have cornered the market on the "Brood of Vipers" merchandise. No one has a banner hanging up that declares that we need to bear fruit worthy of repentance. And somehow, while there is a huge run on all the messaging around preparing during and for this season, no one really seems to mention a whole lot that what needs to be prepared isn't our Christmas trees and our twinkle lights, but the way of the Lord, the crooked paths of the world made straight to welcome in the king of glory, so that he knows the kingdom is fully prepared and ready, his people anxiously awaiting his coming.

When we think about the droves of people who were flocking to the Jordan to be baptized, this was the message that drew them in; a message about returning to the Lord, repenting of what has gone before, and preparing the world for the Lord's coming. This wasn't the happy go lucky message of a white Christmas, this was the hard work message of a prophet calling God's people to anticipate the world being entirely turned upside down, and making their hearts ready so that when it did turn upside down they were ready, prepared for full participation in the coming kingdom.

I think so much of what John the Baptist has to say here gets lost because we've forgotten or changed the meaning, the focus of his message. Advent is our Christmas prep and that means something entirely different in our minds now, than what it did in Galilee 2,000 years ago. When we think of baptism we think of cuddly, sometimes grumpy babies whom we welcome into our family of God, we don't think about the flocks of people who went to the Jordan to literally drown their sins and rise up as new people who were ready and willing to re-dedicate their hearts to the kingdom of God, people who earnestly and honestly examined where they had been, what they had done, and what they needed to change in order to be prepared for when the Messiah showed up on the scene. In so many ways, we have simply relegated John to that weird guy who shows up before Jesus, rather

than truly taking in that what he is saying is as relevant to us as it was to the people of Galilee, along the banks of the Jordan all those years ago.

If John is the one letting all the world know that the Messiah is coming, then we are the people that need to be about the preparations for his arrival. And I know...we think about everything we're doing over the next three weeks and we think that's exactly what we're doing, but look again at what John's primary message is: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." John knows that the Messiah is to be welcomed in like a king, and kings during this time would have entered into cities in the easiest, most public ways possible. The highways were straight and easily accessible so that as many people could witness the arrival as possible, and so that the king's journey would be smooth and not rife with danger or difficulty. There were no Michigan lefts in John's GPS plan for Jesus.

Woefully, much like Michigan's road planners, we are much more prone to make Jesus' way into the world more crooked, rather than straight and smooth. We know at the heart of the gospel lies one simple injunction, to love one another...that is one key to making Jesus' path straight and what do we do? We pretty much straight up refuse to have anything to do with that. We are, quite frankly, not a people interested in loving one another. We will come up with any myriad of excuses for why people don't deserve

to be loved. What they have done to us, what they represent, what they believe, who we think they are, that we just flat out say no, my love is not for them. The bigger problem is that we tend to expand that to, not only is my love not for them, but neither is Jesus'! So we tell a whole world of people, whether it is people that we personally have a conflict with or people we decide to not love simply for who they are that the Messiah is coming but not for them. Talk about a path made crooked. We claim we want people to know Jesus, to feel Jesus, but then rather than just opening our arms and saying, here is Jesus, here is God's love from my heart to yours, we say you have to be this, do this, believe this, and then maybe, possibly we'll talk about letting the pathways get to you.

We claim we want more people to be a part of the church, to come back to church, to feel what we feel when we're here or even when we're just alone with our faith, but instead of making the path straight and saying come on in, our doors are open, and we're ready to welcome you, we throw up road blocks. Well...please don't bring any of your new-fangled ideas here about what we might do differently, please don't challenge anything until you've been here at least 5-7 years, please make sure that you're dressed appropriately and fit into the world we've created here, and if you might be a little different from us, well we'll welcome you, but we might ask

you to keep some of those things in check, because we're welcoming, but we're welcoming on our own terms. We make the path to Jesus as crooked as possible and then wonder why people turn around and go elsewhere.

Even our own hearts, we saw we want our faith to be sturdy and strong and our life with Christ and with each other to be hopeful, and yet, we hear the words of repentance or change and we're like yeah, no, not for me. I like doing what I'm doing, and if God wants that to change, well then tough. We want God to be accommodating to our lives and our schedule, so if we can't fit God, God has gotta deal. We want the path to be straight, but straight on our own terms, and yet Jesus ends up having to curve and wade his way through all the other things we have claimed as more important in order to fully get to us.

We think Michigan lefts make sense. We can give you all the explanations in the world for why we have them. We think the preparations we have made and are making for Jesus make sense, and we'll tell you until we're blue in the face what we're doing, but when confronted with the paths we need to make straight, we declare, well wouldn't it be easier to go this way then that way to get to where you're going? One the banks of the Jordan, from the wilderness John is crying, make the paths straight, for Christ is coming. Will we listen or create more turns? **AMEN!!!**