

**December 10, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church – Advent 2**

**Rev. Elizabeth Molitors**

***“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”  
Mark 1:1***

How many of you here have taught someone to drive? (Happily, you're all still here to talk about it!) I invite you to bring that experience to mind. If you've never taught someone else to drive, then perhaps you remember your own learning-to-drive experience. Try to put yourself back in that time.

Do you remember what it was like? Either teaching or learning?

Teaching someone to drive – learning how to drive – is one of those activities that you just have to *do*. You can talk about driving, you can read about it, you can watch instructional videos; nowadays there are driving simulation programs.....but, even with all that, at some point, you still just have to get behind the wheel and *go*.

It's been only about 6 years since I taught someone to drive – my now 22 year old child – and so the experience is still pretty fresh for me. I remember approaching the process sequentially, walking my brand new driver through the steps of settling into the car, adjusting seats and mirrors, turning on the ignition, and so on. I had the added thrill

and complexity of giving instruction about driving a stick shift, as well.

I tried to be so thorough, to break every part of the driving process down into its component parts. But it was incredibly difficult.

Now, sometimes teaching something is difficult because we're not so sure of the subject ourselves. That's generally not the issue with driving, though. Teaching a skill like driving is so hard because we know it *too* well. After you've driven for so many years, there are things you just *know* without realizing you know them. Things you see and take in in the surrounding traffic that you're not even aware you're seeing or taking in. Things you feel and sense that cause you to change and adapt as you move down the street, that you might be hard-pressed to describe to someone just starting out.

I recall explaining the shifting process: press down the clutch with your left foot, move the gear shift with your right hand, then release the clutch out slowly while at the same time pressing the accelerator. Four easy steps! (Then the new driver tries following your four easy steps and immediately kills the engine after lurching forward a few inches.) Clarifications are added – about *when* to shift, at what speeds, and how those speeds are generalizations and not hard and fast rules and that the timing of shifting depends on road conditions and whether you're going uphill or downhill or on flat

ground or around a curve. Trying to describe the sound and the feel, how the engine *tells* you when it wants to shift, but if you wait until you hear the engine straining, you've really waited a bit too long. And we haven't even started talking about downshifting.

In driving, as in perhaps all skills, it comes down to looking and listening, practicing and failing. Trying again.

(Lather. Rinse. Repeat.)

As we read through the whole narrative of the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures, and look for the common theme or thread running through it, I get this vision of God in my mind, of God shaking God's head in frustration and exasperation over how hard it is to convey to humanity what seems, on the face of it, to be some pretty straightforward driving instructions – all we need to know to make our way through the world:

*I made you. I love you. I'm with you. Don't be afraid. Tell others.*

God explained this to Adam and Eve, to Noah and Abraham and Sarah. Novice drivers all, they stalled in the metaphorical driveway, not getting too far.

Some clarifications were in order. God elaborated on God's instructions:

*I made you, all of you, because the universe was incomplete without you*

*I made you, out of love, in order to spend time with you, have a relationship with you*

*I made you to enjoy the beauty and abundance I created for you*

*I made you to care for and respect each other, to connect with each other, to rely on each other*

*I made you with eyes to see, ears to listen, hearts to feel, and hands to reach out and help*

*I made you curious and smart and creative, to make a difference in the world*

*I made you, and I'll always be with you*

*Tell others.*

God taught this to new generations – to Isaac and Jacob and Jacob's wives. To Joseph and Moses and the Israelites.

And in every age, when it was humanity's chance in the driver's seat, as we attempted to act on God's instructions, we invariably forgot or otherwise messed up at least one of the steps, which killed the engine as we lurched forward just a little bit.

Having left the Old Testament behind, we come now to a new chapter in this instruction manual for humanity, or rather, a new *way* of instruction. This part of our learning features a hands-on instructor, someone who'll sit next to us in the front seat, pointing out the most important things to notice and attend to on the journey, the things that, with God's help, we might eventually come to know so well they feel like instinct and second nature:

*How to see the overlooked and voiceless who need someone to stand with them.*

*How to listen for the fearful and wary who need reassurance.*

*How to ignore and avoid the distractions that threaten to pull away our attention.*

At the beginning of Mark's gospel, which we read this morning, we have yet to meet our new instructor, but John the Baptist is prepping us for his arrival. John's emphasis, there in the wilderness, is on repentance, which is not – despite how the word is most commonly used – it is not about guilt and feeling bad, but about practicing and failing, and trying again. As one Eastern Orthodox theologian puts it, “To repent is to look, not downward at my own shortcomings, but upward toward God's love; not backward in self-reproach, but forward in truthfulness. It is to see, not what I have failed to be, but what by the grace of Christ I can yet become.” *[Metropolitan Kallistos Ware]*

The coming of Jesus, which this season of Advent celebrates and anticipates, continues the instruction that God has offered all of us from the beginning of time – God made us, God loves us, God is with us, and because of all this, we should not be afraid. In fact, Jesus is the pure embodiment of that instruction – fully divine and fully human, the incarnation of love, the manifestation of God's being. Seated next to us to guide us as we make our way through the world, to show us where to look, how to see, what to listen for. To be with us when we stall; to encourage us to practice, to fail, to try again. This is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ. *Amen.*