“MINDING THE GAP”

2 Samuel 7:1-11; Luke 1:26-38

“Third Sunday,” Mission Presbytery, 4 Advent

I’ll tell you how I got there in a minute,

but reading these two scripture passages this morning

made me think of the London Underground!

How many of you have been to London?

London is connected by this fabulous subway system

that is affectionately called “The Tube.”

At many stops along the way,

people getting off and on the trains

are warned by a booming recorded voice to

“Mind the gap!”

It used to be human conductors who issued the warning,

but electronic recordings

require less maintenance than humans,

and they don’t get bored

with saying the same thing over and over again!

Mind the gap!

That’s subway-speak for “watch your step,”

to watch out for the space

between the platform and the subway car.

Telling passengers to “mind the gap”

first became necessary

on the northern line of the underground.

When the system was being built,

the lines were required to be built under existing roads.

And so at some places,

the curves in the underground had to be especially sharp.

So when there is a ninety degree angle road,

and a rounded station platform,

there are bound to be a few gaps!

The worst of the gaps is at Bank Station,

so named because it’s the closest stop to the Bank of England.

“They say” that the gap at the Bank Station is so large

because the tunnel diggers had to adjust their line

in order to miss digging into the bank vaults!

Over the years,

what started as a warning

about boarding and exiting the subway

at Bank Station in London

has become a national greeting.

Londoners will look at each other

and say “Mind the gap”

when they are nowhere near a tube station,

much like you and I might say “Happy trails”

or “hook ‘em Horns” or “Gig ‘em Aggies” to someone,

(or of course, “Go Roos!”)

and they would give us a knowing smile in return.

You may remember Michael Palin

from the Monty Python comedy troupe.

(I never thought I’d quote Michael Palin in a sermon!)

He has carved a new career for himself

as a travel commentator and author.

In writing about the phrase “Mind the gap,”

he said that the mere use of it

“must surely have the creators of the system

spinning in their graves!”

That’s because the need to say it, he writes, //

is an acknowledgment that the system doesn’t quite work.

It means that no matter how fast the trains go,

and no matter how frequently they run,

no matter how convenient and affordable the service is,

somehow the trains don’t always hit the platforms.

And that points to a larger issue, he says:

there’s not just a gap “between the train and the platform,

but between the designer and the user,

staff and passenger.”

There is more than one gap to be minded.

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That is where our scripture readings come in this morning.

It seems to me

that our lives are pockmarked with gaps:

gaps between what we say and what we do,

between what we want to happen and what really happens,

between our desires and our pocketbooks,

between our ambitions and our time.

Perhaps most of all,

between heaven and earth.

That’s one of the things that comes painfully into focus

during the season of Advent.

At no other time during the church year,

even more than Lent, I think,

are we so aware of the distance

between God’s good intentions for us

and the way we actually live too much of the time.

Think about it:

we didn’t exactly get it right in the Garden of Eden.

It didn’t take long after Noah and the Ark

for things to go south again.

Even being brought out of the wilderness didn’t fix it.

When the people asked God to establish earthly kings,

that didn’t go as well as they had hoped.

It was clear

that there was a gap to be minded between heaven and earth,

and not even the best engineer on earth

could find a way around it.

King David tried.

Like Saint Peter would try to do hundreds of years later,

King David felt like building a permanent structure for God

was the thing to do.

Perhaps he thought that if God had a real house like his,

it would be easier to visit God.

Perhaps he wanted to make sure

that God had a dwelling at least as nice as his own.

But the first bit of good news you’ll hear today

is that God cannot be contained.

The God we worship is a lot larger than a house made of cedar,

and when that news doesn’t scare our socks off,

it should make us glad.

God will go where God will go,

and God will do what God will do.

David wanted to build a physical house for God.

But God said to David,

“Thanks, but let me build you a house.

A real house.”

It was God who minded the gap,

and God who promised to repair it.

And if God promises to build a house,

you can be sure it will be grander

than anything we could ever imagine.

Fast forward now about six or seven hundred years.

A young girl in a small town was going about her life,

making plans for her wedding

and marveling about the “miracle baby” on the way

to her cousin Elizabeth.

All of a sudden,

she herself is encountered by an angel named Gabriel.

She still couldn’t believe what was happening

when Gabriel said,

“You remember King David?

Remember that house that God promised to him?

Here’s how it’s going to happen.”

God had not forgotten God’s promise to mind the gap.

In fact,

God was the only one in all of creation who COULD mind it.

And God chose to do so,

in God’s wisdom and in God’s time.

God chose to mind the gap between heaven and earth

in a city called Nazareth,

for in the words of Gabriel,

“Nothing shall be impossible with God.”

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Fast-forward now about two thousand years.

Once again,

there is no shortage of gaps in our world, is there?

What once might have been gaps

have become full-blown fissures

between the rich and the poor,

those who are full and those who are hungry,

those who are powerful and those who are weak;

between those who live on the wrong side of the tracks

and those who do not;

between different races;

between different denominations, much less different religions;

between those of red state tendencies

and those of blue state tendencies.

The polarization of our nation is heartbreaking.

Suffice it to say

that there are plenty of places for us to step off the platform

and not make it all the way on to the train,

and put ourselves into a life-threatening position.

There may never have been another time in history

when the platform has been more like Swiss cheese //

because there are such perilous gaps to mind,

and so many of them.

***Friends, the good news of the gospel is this:***

***we cannot overcome the gaps,***

***but the gaps have been minded for us.***

***The gap has been overcome***

***in the birth of Jesus,***

***son of Mary and son of God.***

***There’s no way that we could have overcome that particular gap on our own.***

***But God so loves us, we are told,***

***that God has minded the gap***

***and given us life itself***

***in the form of God’s own Son.***

Given all that,

how can we do anything else

but respond in gratitude and love?

Our job now,

since the gap has been minded for us,

is to love others as we have been loved,

to serve others as we have been served,

to help others mind the gaps.

We can alert them to the spots that we know are tricky,

share with them the ways to stay safe on the platform,

help to get them on board,

maybe even lay down in front of the train

if that’s necessary //

to help them understand the great gift

that has been given to us all.

We can share with them the good news

that nothing will be impossible with God.

***Nothing // will be impossible with God.***

And here’s how we get started:

by saying the very words that Mary said to Gabriel:

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord.

 Let it be with me according to your word.”

Amen.

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Michael Palin wrote these words in the foreword to the book *Mind the Gap* by Simon James.)