

Juggling Boards of Salvation
Dr. Bob Hawkins

A familiar sight in the Lowcountry, particularly South of Broad in Charleston, are ten- to sixteen-foot-long contraptions set on the long porches (or piazzas in the local dialect) of the Charleston single houses. History suggests that these long, pine boards affixed to what appears to be misplaced rocking chair parts descend from one constructed a bit after 1806 for the Acton Plantation piazza in Sumter County. The plantation owner, Cleland Kinlock, invited his widowed sister Mary Kinlock Huger to live in the large house and supervise the household. Afflicted with rheumatism and desiring some therapeutic exercise, she had written to her family in Scotland, receiving a prototype design. The juggling board could afford Mary some gentle jiggling (joggling) resembling a pleasant carriage ride. Another popular story suggests that the board morphed into a way to do some tasteful courting on the front porch, the board's bounce eventually joggling a young couple into scandalous proximity – Lord have mercy!

Pastor Hill afforded us some gentle joggling for our minds and hearts last Sunday as he reviewed the unfolding of the Christian Year on Christ the King. Serendipitously, I had several conversations that morning with folks about various aspects of the liturgical calendar, all of us joggling our minds about what needs to be done. Next Sunday is the First Sunday, not only in Advent, but of a whole new Christian Year ready to unfold. Folks are busily planning how to go about decorating the church appropriately. The choir and praise team are getting masks, minds, instruments and voices around new responsibilities for the Sundays in Advent and Christmas. Worship will include familiar yet different aspects appropriate for the seasons. Another conversation included the differences and similarities between Lutherans and other “liturgical traditions” regarding the color for Advent, not to mention the subtle differences between Sundays IN Advent and Sundays OF Christmas. It may sound like the Church is being needlessly fussy about prepositions, but there are significant theological insights wrapped up in the INs, OFs, and AFTERS of specific Sundays.

The rhythms, details, and language issues of the liturgical calendar are important, NOT because they just change up stuff to keep some from being bored by the same ol – same ol, and irritating others who would actually prefer just the same ol. It is very easy to get caught up in the glitz and glamor of the holidays, the decorations, the festive worship, the parties, the family dinners, and a host of other issues which eventually begin to overwhelm us. Rather, what the seasons and commemorations try to do is jog our minds and hearts to ask again and again, “What does this mean for us and for our salvation.” This gentle joggle of our thoughts and emotions has far more to do with the sentiment Elizabeth Barrett Browning captures in her 43rd sonnet, “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways...” She touches on what jogs our hearts and minds each day as we think of loved ones near and far, we remember that we are part of a 130-year old faith community which has trod these liturgical paths for decades, or as we help young ones learn to pray the prayers and sing the songs we once were taught.

It is to this daily joggling of who and whose we are that the venerable Prophet Jeremiah refers this coming Sunday: *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved*

and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness." [Jeremiah 33:14-16]. As God's people, we focus on God's saving work still unfolding. As God's expectant people, we stand between "...the promise made to the houses of Israel and Judah" and the return of Christ our King, "the Sun of Righteousness with healing in his wings." The last phrase, part of the Prophet Malachi's words to us sometimes heard in Advent, we rehearse each time we sing or hear "Hark the Herald Angels Sing!" Indeed, the carols, hymns, as well as the popular tunes of the holidays, also do their work of gentle juggling.

This coming Sunday is the beginning of our New Year. Perhaps it would be fitting to sing the chorus of Scottish poet Robert Burns' reflection on time and relationships so together we might toast the future full of thanksgiving and hope. Burns encourages us to juggle our minds and hearts about times past and those we have known and loved: "...should old acquaintance be forgot, and auld lang syne?" The concluding Gaelic phrase means "...for the sake of old times." It is a gentle, juggling reminder that God's people rehearse their long "salvation history" with God through the liturgy, preaching, song, and sacraments, remembering God's fidelity and presence with us and for us throughout. Then we can trust to move with confidence into God's future of which we are a part. This is most certainly true!