For those of you who have been in the military you know the joy that is basic training. I went to Commissioned Officer’s Training (COT), which is to basic training what the New York Jets are to professional football. It is the same but different. So, I can’t quite say that I had the same sort of *Full Metal Jacket* type of experience that many of you had because we did have a housekeeping staff that made our beds. But even with my slightly cupcake version there was a structure to the weeks that is similar to what others experienced during their more intense forms of military initiation. Part and parcel of the structure are the rules and the infringements upon your privacy. Everything you do is watched and critiqued. You are told when and where to walk and if you are walking correctly and at the right speed; you are told when you can start eating and when you must stop and like a six-year-old you are told when to go to bed and when to wake up. But the thing is, gradually, it all gets less severe. You have a little more freedom in the third week than you had in the first and so on. And this is sort of the feeling I have about Advent, at least in terms of our readings.

In week one we heard about the sun being darkened and stars falling from the sky. In the second week we have the wild man John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness and telling everyone to repent. But now in the third week things start to soften a bit. We hear about John the Baptist and he still talks some about preparing the way of the Lord, but John’s Gospel also gives us this rather lovely description of what John the Baptist did saying, “He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.” Light shining in the darkness is always a nice image. And it’s not just John who is turning that frown upside down. Paul in Thessalonians tells us to “give thanks in all circumstances.” But the real trip to the happy hunting ground comes in Isaiah when we hear the prophet say that God has sent him “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.” In some ways we have moved from a narrative that was based on the fear of what is bad to the love of what is good. The sort of first few weeks of basic training have given way to a more lovely and beautiful narrative. So, what is going on? Why this change? We are still in Advent and the message of preparation is the same, but the way of conveying it has changed. The drill instructor is no longer yelling at us but rather telling us to move towards the light. So how do we reconcile these two very different ways that we are told to do the same thing? Well, part of the reason for this difference in the conveyance of the message may be somewhat simple, something that most kindergarten teachers know and that is for the message to sink in we often need to hear it in various ways.

When I was at my first parish in McAllen, Texas, we had a food pantry and once a month we distributed a box of food to each family unit. In addition to giving out food we also served dinner. So, the way it worked was that you would come and eat and then be given your box of food. It was a fun time and families would often come early to socialize and let their kids to play on our playground. One time when the kids were out playing a group of them decided that simply climbing on the play structures was far too staid and that a much better activity would be to start throwing rocks at each other. Seeing this I walked over and politely asked them to stop, and further explained to them that the reason I was making this request was because I was concerned for their safety – I didn’t want to see them get hurt. It worked for a few moments and then it resumed, so I returned for a second time to again ask them to stop throwing rocks at each other. This time I tried to be a little more forceful. After a moment of this one of the kids asked, “are you going to call the cops?” This seemed to catch everyone’s attention and so I hedged a bit and replied, “I don’t want to, but you do need to stop throwing rocks.” After this exchange there was calm. The rock throwing stopped and everyone went back to playing in a reasonably peaceful way. In both cases the message was the same – you need to stop throwing rocks. However, the way the message was delivered was different. In the first instance I tried to be positive and caring, telling them that I wanted to keep them safe. In the second instance I inadvertently stumbled on a threat -- if you keep throwing rocks you could be going to the big house. The threatening message worked while the caring message did not.

One of the objections I hear in regards to Christianity is that it is all based on fear – go to church or else you will spend eternity in New Jersey listening to Barry Manilow. I understand this objection. We don’t like to be frightened and cajoled into doing things. I mean I didn’t like the first few weeks of Commissioned Officer’s Training. But the thing is there are many places in the Bible, including in the words of Jesus, where we get scary and threatening language -- Jesus does mention being cast into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. But I think the problem with this objection to the threatening language is that it assumes that we are always responsive to the nice and polite way of God getting our attention. It is my opinion that these types of pronouncements are in there not because God is a big mean-y, but rather because sometimes has to threaten to call the cops to get us to stop harming ourselves and others. Think about this: God’s opening action in Genesis was to create us and place us in paradise and so naturally we decided that we had a better idea. As the story of creation proves when God tries the good cop approach, we don’t always go along with it. That is why I ultimately do not find this objection to threatening statements to be not all that convincing. And the reason I say this is because I think it is trying to make our problem into God’s problem. We say that we want God to be nice and polite, but when he is, we often don’t pay him any attention and keep throwing rocks at one another. For some reason we need the negative before we will pay attention.

If you don’t believe me ask yourself this question: Why do newspapers run so many articles about bad things happening? Now I realize that some of this can be blamed on the media itself, but much of it is because we like to read it. We like to hear about bad things. If you look at cable TV you may have noticed that we now have entire news networks whose business model is to report on bad things about the people their viewers don’t like. Sadly, our instinct is often for the gutter and so that is where God has to go to find us. My hope is that we would all be ready to respond to the message of today, the ones about worshiping the beauty of God. But sometimes we are not. God gives these threats like we heard in the first two weeks of advent not because he is a jerk but because he wants nothing more than for us to repent and return to him. So he will call to us in whatever way is needed to get our attention so that we may be his both now and forevermore.