

## ***Prepare the Way of the Lord***

Luke 3:1-8

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The church year begins with Advent. With each new church year, we read throughout the year from a different gospel account, and we've just entered the year of Luke. As with each gospel, Luke's account has particular things to say about the life and meaning of Jesus Christ. Luke sets out to tell an orderly account of the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, but also to account for how these events fit into the larger course of history, particularly the larger story of God and the people of Israel.

Today we join Luke's gospel, already in motion, as Jesus is growing up and growing in God's favor in Jerusalem, teaching and preparing at the great temple, we move to another part of the story, the place where the rest of the world is being prepared, down by the river.

### **Luke 3:1-6 (NRSV)**

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, <sup>2</sup>during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. <sup>5</sup>Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; <sup>6</sup>and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Luke, today's gospel teller, situates the introduction of God on earth in Jesus Christ, at a particular moment, in a particular place, proclaimed by a particular person. When Tiberius was emperor, says the text, when Pilate was governor, when Herod was ruler of Galilee, when Annas and Caiaphas were high priests in the temple of Jerusalem, at this historical moment, the word of God came to JOHN in the WILDERNESS. So while the Romans ruled the land from their halls of power, and while the high priests ruled the faith from the Great Temple, the word of God came to John, a peasant nobody outsider, in the wilderness. The word of God came not to the rulers and priests, but to a wanderer, not inside the city or temple, but beyond all walls.

While the word of God came outside the city and temple, the word came inside the story of God and God's people. As the prophet Isaiah said, a voice is crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." John's proclaiming change and forgiveness in the wilderness is an echo of an ancient and familiar voice to the people of Israel, announcing the coming transformation, "Every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill made low, the crooked made straight, the rough ways smoothed, all flesh shall see the salvation of God." John is introducing the fulfillment of a promise made long ago, a promise made in a long line of relationship between God and God's people, a promise for a new world in which the justice-making way of the Lord becomes real. What is to come, the salvation of God, is described as world changing, people changing, paths changing, resulting in a salvation for all to see. A visible transformation of everything. For the people wandering in the wilderness, the outcast, the marginalized, the poor, the uninvited, what a welcome promise of a new world order, in which the low would be raised and made equal! It was the time that had been yearned for over centuries, and the divine promise of fulfillment was finally unfolding before their very eyes and ears. The way of the Lord is coming.

The way of the Lord, the remaking of earth, the coming of justice, was being prepared not in the halls of power, but in the wilderness, and as part of the ongoing story of God and the people. This fulfillment begins with God's word coming to John the Baptist. What word came to John is not known, but what the

word evoked in him was to travel all the region of the Jordan river, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Proclaiming change and washing and immersing yourself in God's claim of baptism. Whatever word came to John was about change, completely reorienting his life for God, and proclaiming the coming of the Lord.

But notice what was happening here, as persons were invited to be changed and be baptized, a new community was being made, the first church. John was the builder of the first church, where gospel preaching happened, where followers were united in baptism, where agents of change were brought together as God was being reintroduced to the world in Jesus Christ. This text that on the surface seems to be an invitation to each one of us individually is actually a call to all of us collectively. Prepare the way of the Lord, in the original Greek text, reads as an imperative in the second person plural, and Y'ALL know how I like to translate the second person plural. Y'ALL prepare the way of the Lord, Y'ALL make his paths straight, and all flesh, everyone, shall see the salvation of God.

So as we hear this Advent call to prepare the way of the Lord, we must hear it as a call to all of us, as the church, that our purpose in being together is to prepare the way of the Lord so that a new world can be made. We prepare the way by changing ourselves, continually, to draw nearer to the image of justice that God has in mind. This is the point in hearing the story that we ask, change, repentance, what is this message calling me to do? Well, thankfully, the followers of John the Baptist asked that very question of John. The story of the baptizer goes on in ensuing verses, when John tells the people, "bear fruits worthy of a changed life." And when the crowds of this first church asked John, "what then should we do?" John says, "whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." This is a re-ordering, a call for the use of resources and power to lift up the poor, a call for sharing and living justly.

This Winnetka Presbyterian Church has heard the call to share and live justly for over 50 years now, and given of itself in support of ministries to the poor and homeless in Chicagoland and in marginalized communities all over the world. Preparing the way of the Lord, collectively, is a familiar refrain and practice around here I've learned. Hearing this familiar refrain again, in this holy Advent waiting time, this time of getting ready and anticipating the coming of the Lord's justice, invites us to think about new ways we can participate in this divine movement in which valleys are filled and hills made low. What new births can we be part of in this holy moment of expectation? Things are happening, a new Angel Tree ministry to folks struggling in Rogers Park, a ministry to homeless families called Family Promise that many of us will participate in this coming year, we can make meals and serve at the Good News Community Kitchen, every time we reach out in the spirit of giving and working for justice, we participate in preparing the way of the Lord.

New births of justice happen all the time, and signify the coming of God that we proclaim every Advent. Back in 1944, such a birth took place when the spirit moved a Sunday school teacher named Dan West. He was a Christian, a member of the Church of the Brethren, and heard the call of Christ's gospel to prepare the way of the Lord. So he imagined a worldwide program to end hunger and poverty, and invited others to serve God by serving our brothers and sisters across the globe. Dan West discovered that the greatest gift you can give to communities struggling with abject poverty is a chance at making their own way. When given a chance, he learned, communities and people were capable of building themselves up and sustaining a better life. The chance Dan West and his movement gave to poor people all across the globe was an animal, a cow, a sheep, a chicken, who could provide fertilizer or labor or food, who could breed and help build sustainable farming in places where it seemed impossible. This discovery, of the power of a chance, of the power of a sustainable life, became known to the world and to this church as Heifer International, now a worldwide organization dedicated to battling hunger across the globe, and preparing the way of the Lord. As we make our Christmas preparations, and think about gifts we'll give each other lovingly, let us consider the voice of Luke's gospel inviting us to think about gifts we'll give others, the poor, this season, perhaps by giving

someone in your family or a friend the gift of livestock, through Heifer International, letting them know that you are giving them the gift of preparing the way of the Lord in some place that desperately needs to see this new way.

Parker Palmer hears the Christian story as a call to stand, as Jesus Christ did, as John did, in the “tragic gap,” in the space between what is now and what should be, on the way to a new justice and peace in the world. Let us, Christ’s Church, hear again the invitation to come to the river, outside the walls of our regular life, to the place where we and our world will be changed, as God promised.