

Baruch 5:1-9
Canticle 16: The Song of Zechariah
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

In our earlier life as a family, there was nothing our children dreaded more than the hours...and sometimes days...spent getting ready for company to come stay for a visit for a number of days. Usually, these visits would be from the grandparents. Now both my husband and I and all of our children looked forward to visits from the grandparents. It was always a time of great energy and joy with special meals and special excursions. What the children *didn't* like at all was the fact that their mother turned into a complete shrew in preparing the house for guests! Most of us tidy up a bit when we know that we're having company. When it's the mother and/or the mother-in-law, it's a time of high anxiety until after they arrive. Everything has to be just so. Everything has to be put away. Everything has to be cleaned. Everything broken has to be repaired. Everything has to be orderly. In short, the place has to be spit-shined and ready for inspection...for surely, it *will* be inspected.

In the liturgical year of our church, Advent is the time of getting cleaned up and getting ready. It's the official time of preparation for the entry of Jesus into the world. It's the time of getting everything sorted out and of repairing everything that's broken. We aren't getting ready for the grandparents to show up. We're getting ready for someone far more important. We are getting ready for Jesus to enter the world and we are preparing for him to enter our lives and our hearts as well, but it's not an automatic process. We need to be ready for him...otherwise, he's likely to wait patiently outside until we *are* ready.

In our gospel lesson this morning the first person we meet is the one announcing Jesus' imminent arrival. It is John the Baptist who is living in the wilderness. The child John grew and became strong in spirit, and he was *in the wilderness* until the day he appeared publicly to Israel. John the Baptist does not simply appear one day in the desert. Luke suggests that his growth and spiritual strength actually developed there. John isn't just some odd fellow who randomly appears just prior to Jesus' public ministry. John hails from priestly ancestry on both sides of his family (Luke 1:5-6). His father, Zechariah, is a priest whose rotation of duties includes service in the Jerusalem Temple. Elizabeth, his mother, descends from the line of priests originating with Aaron. If John were following the family business, he would be engaged in work associated with the Temple, the holy place in Jerusalem where God is said to

dwell. Instead, he like many other young people ready to leave home, he spends his formative years being trained by God in the desert.

The desert also plays an important part in the development of the people of Israel as a whole as well. It is in the desert...or the wilderness, a place of vulnerability and danger that God appears and they learn to depend on God. The Hebrew Bible portrays the wilderness as a place of desolation and scarcity, but also (rather counter-intuitively, perhaps) as a place of safety and divine provision. John challenges God's people to see the wilderness as a place of hope, not of desolation. God is calling them, like the Babylonian exiles, to leave their captors behind and head home through the wilderness. And we are all held captive by so many things...sometimes by our own choices.

The physical road from Babylon back to Israel is a rough journey. It requires travel over a long distance and a difficult topography. The metaphorical road is a challenge as well. The Israelites had been changed by the experience of exile, as we are all changed by our captivity to something and now they were returning to a home that was also changed. Through Isaiah's prophecy God promises to prepare them for the journey, to "smooth the way" for their return to life in the Promised Land. God will make straight paths through the wilderness, a smooth and easy return — in essence a new "exodus" — bringing the people of Israel out of bondage and back to the Promised Land just as they were taken out of captivity when they were in bondage in Egypt.

We hear this promise of return from exile in Isaiah 40:3-5

³"A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of
 the Lord,
 make straight in the desert a highway
 for our God.

⁴Every valley shall be lifted up,
 and every mountain and hill be made
 low;

the uneven ground shall become level,
 and the rough places a plain.

⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be
 revealed,
 and all people shall see it together,
 for the mouth of the Lord has
 spoken."

The purpose of John's prophetic calling is not only to prepare the way of the Lord (Luke 3:4), but to prepare the people to receive the Lord (Luke 1:16-17) through repentance for the forgiveness of sin (Luke 3:3; repentance in Greek is the word *metanoia* and it means to change one's mind). Repentance is not just the expression of regret or sorrow for one's actions...although that's part of it. Repentance means a complete turning away from those actions that we regret or feel some sorrow about. Repentance means a new way of thinking as well as a new way of behaving and feeling. It's a change of both thought and heart. It's the kind of inner transformation that bears visible fruit. We actually become different.

The arrival of the word of God to John is not just "in the wilderness" around the Jordan, but in the wilderness of the political world of that time: during the reigns of *emperor* Tiberius, *governor* Pilate, and "*ruler*" Herod. Luke's purpose in including the political world is to situate the revelation of John the Baptizer in the context of the temporal framework of the native ruler Herod, the local but foreign governor Pilate, and the final authority who sits above all, Tiberius of Rome. Luke's litany of imperial, regional, and religious authorities does more than date John's ministry to 28 or 29 CE. It also contrasts human kingdoms with God's reign. Luke, that is, does not name Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas merely to set the stage for John's appearance, but rather to throw in sharp relief the forces that will oppose John and Jesus well. John's preaching will ultimately lead to his beheading by one of those just named, while Jesus will still later be crucified by another. Those who are threatened by repentance and forgiveness, after all, will not go without a fight.

Luke is keenly interested in the impact his gospel story will have not simply on the world as *kosmos* — the world, that is, conceived most generally — but also on the world as *oikoumene* — the world as it is constituted by the political, economic, and religious powers. John's preaching of repentance, because it will literally turn people away from the powers that be to the Lord, threatens those invested in the present order.

Luke's gospel tells us that preparing the Lord's path toward peace requires overturning the world as we know it.

This is a hopeful and necessary message for us today. It doesn't take much effort to imagine our own world as a desert. Scarcity, isolation, hunger, and violence seem to rule the day in so many places...not to mention the threat to all of us from the global pandemic. The pain and injustice around us can make us wonder whether God is at work in *this* wilderness. But Luke suggests that the wilderness is precisely where God provides what we need, so that we can now be the ones "crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" Very little is certain about the post-pandemic world, except for the promise represented by John's proclamation in the

wilderness: God enters **this** time **and this** space in **this** period of history, so that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6). He is foretelling our own time.

Preparing for God’s arrival means rethinking systems and structures that we see as normal but that God condemns as oppressive and crooked. It means letting God humble everything that is proud and self-satisfied in us, and letting God heal and lift up whatever is broken and beaten down within us. The claims that the world’s authorities make often conflict with God’s claims. Paths that seem satisfactory to us are not good enough for God. John calls us to let God’s bulldozers reshape the world’s social systems and the landscape of our own minds and hearts. God’s ways are not our ways. In the midst of a world divided by politics and religion alike, the word that comes to John is a call to return to the Lord. Surely in our own time, we can see and feel the divisions in politics as well as the divisions in religion. Both arenas now seem farther apart than ever.

John, moved by the word of God, plays two characteristically prophetic roles: (1) He calls for repentance and, indeed, proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and (2) he also precedes, and prepares the way for, and foretells the coming of the Messiah, the one who is the salvation of Israel and us. His is a top-down look at the political reality of the day...his day and ours. In a sense, this would situate the word, which comes to John, and the Messiah whose path John prepares, in very bottom-up terms; the small, the unexpected, the apparently trivial comes as answer to the problems of the hierarchical political structure under which it is apparently pinned. Luke’s gospel is all about the poor being lifted up and the mighty being bought down. This is a world set right by being turned on its head—not by the top-down power that is so often prized by humans, but by the upside down power of God which Luke references frequently.

Those willing to be drawn into this story, Luke proclaims, though perhaps beset by the powerful of the world, have nevertheless been joined to Jesus’ death and resurrection and so will also and eventually triumph...for we know that Jesus is ultimately triumphant. We who sit and listen to this reading about a nobody named John, gripped by the word of God in the nowhere of the wilderness, are likewise suddenly, mysteriously, and oh so powerfully included in the story of repentance, forgiveness, and salvation that begins here but ends only with the close of the age John inaugurates.....which has not ended yet.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.