

Luke 3: 1-6 “Prepare the Way of the Lord” Rev. Janet Chapman 12/8/24

Whenever Tom Hanks has a movie come out, I am almost always there...not because his mom lived just 15 miles south of us, so he’s one of the few celebrities who actually knows a bit about Redding & Red Bluff, but because he usually does top quality movies. So before his most recent movie called “Here” came out (unfortunately not one of those really great ones), I decided to watch “Forrest Gump” again for the umpteenth time. One of the fun things about this movie is all the celebrities that Gump gets to meet in his lifetime, sometimes by chance and sometimes by his hard work and endeavors. You may remember the floating feather carried by the wind which becomes a symbol that our lives are guided by both chance and divine influences. Whatever our destiny, through chance or divine interference, Gump seems to learn that the most important people in our lives are not the most famous, the most well-known, but are often the characters seldom seen, like Forrest Gump himself whose story begins and ends with this mystical feather at his feet.

In Chapter 3 of Luke, it begins with a formidable list of who’s who, 7 names that rule over some hard to pronounce areas, that are high-ranking folks of society. Luke gives us their names to situate us within a specific political time in history, but I skipped over them because they are not the most important by gospel standards. If it were a movie, picture the feather at first floating over Herod’s palace or Caesar’s Roman mansion, only to have a gust of wind take the feather up and up and then far from the citadels of civilization. The camera follows the feather until it slowly begins to tilt downward out in the middle of a wilderness wasteland, coming to land at the calloused and filthy foot of a wild-looking man named John. Scott Hoezee describes him as having wild honey dripping off his scraggly beard and wearing something resembling the fur of some road-kill animal from the side of the highway. He’s got a distant look in his eyes, as though at any moment he might lunge forward and begin to spout off whatever foolish things reside in his head. Except that Luke tells us that what’s in his head is a far cry from foolish. The man at whose feet the feather lands has been divinely influenced by the word of the Lord. He preaches to the peasants,

“Let the big-wigs launch their policy initiatives, levy their much-dreaded tariffs, try to keep the country from going over one fiscal cliff or another, let Caesar write himself into the history books with lies, and Herod wield his power to eliminate immigrants from his doorstep; but if it is God’s truth you are looking for, if it’s the path of wholeness you seek, then turn away from all that and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.” Luke shows us to learn what really matters, go to the desert. Go to the crazy man who is constructing the salvation highway of our God, who is laying the foundation for transformation that lasts. There you find a path that leads somewhere worth going, there you find wisdom to return and fight the injustices and oppression of our world, to take on the big-wigs and resist.

It is true that Rome built some of the best roads, highways and bridges around, as Caesar’s wife had begun a “Highway Beautification” initiative. You could get around the ancient world better than at any point in recorded history. Travel was easy and trade routes were prosperous, but not one of those roads could save the world or usher in a new realm as God willed it. For that road, you had to go to the place of death, to the dangerous wilderness where robbers lurked and wild beasts devoured the wayward traveler. You had to go to the place that symbolized everything that was wrong with this world because that was the place from which God launched a final push to defeat the chaos of evil and usher back in the cosmos of God’s original good creation. Unfortunately, we are too easily swayed by the winds that blow where they will and we look to all the wrong places for hope and peace – we look to Wall Street, Hollywood, D.C. But Luke says, “Ain’t gonna happen.” Peace isn’t going to come from those places, not ultimately, not finally. Look to the unlikely places because that is where the preparation begins. Look to the wild man who says, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Look to the relief workers serving the people in Africa in Christ’s name who lost so much to disease and famine. Look to the first responders who place the well-being of others before their own. Look to the high school and college kids of CHYBA building tiny homes for the unsheltered, look to the addiction specialists walking beside those in recovery, look to the people on their knees fervently praying to be shown how they

might ease the burdens of others. It's messy business, these are rough roads to navigate, and not for the faint of heart. Marlene LeFever, lifelong teacher once penned, to become an effective teacher is simple. You just prepare and prepare until drops of blood appear on your forehead. If you seek change that lasts, that taps into what C.S. Lewis called "the deep magic of the universe," then these are the types of places to go.

In the season of Advent, it is so easy to get distracted, to be focused on the wrong things, to rush around so we get to the manger faster. But this isn't something to be hurried. Preparing the path before us takes more time than we think. A young pastor used to boast that all the time he ever needed to prepare and get ready to preach his Sunday sermon was the few minutes it took him to walk to the church from the parsonage next door. After a few weeks of hearing his sermons, the congregation voted to buy a new parsonage – five miles away! This time of rushing around to accomplish as many tasks as possible, of not taking intentional time to prepare ourselves, our lives, for the new realm God asks of us as symbolized by the birth of the divine child, is not to be taken lightly. Even the manger scene gets glossed over with so much glitter that in truth we forget that Jesus' birth took place out in the middle of nowhere, at a time when everyone else was paying attention to the movers and shakers elsewhere. But we don't have to be celebrities, rulers, or among the rich and powerful to be used by God. God is eager to use our talents, abilities, and gifts to change the world, even in what seems like very small ways, that are, of course, not small at all to those who receive such gifts. God chooses people the world can easily ignore to participate in God's world-changing, world-saving activity. The highway to healing and wholeness, the path to the Word of the Lord, is often based in the least likely places and utilizing the least likely people you could name.

Therefore, I want to challenge us to name those places or people as a way to prepare our hearts and minds to be there, to see them, if not literally then figuratively. In your bulletins today, you found a sticky note; for those of you at home, I invite you to grab a piece of paper nearby. There are places and people who are easily forgotten,

overlooked, in our world; at our jobs, in our relationships, in civic life, on the news. There are nobodies who are somebodies by gospel standards, there are deserts and wildernesses that are in need of healing and wholeness – what are their names? Where are they? Who are they? Write them down on your sticky note; name them and by naming them, we prepare the way, we start to construct a new awareness and foundation upon which salvation is restored. We move from apathy to empathy. Write down names that come to mind and place your slip in the offering plate as it comes around in a few moments; we will post them on our church's Christmas tree at the back. Ponder those places and people and go there. Because that is where you will find life, and life abundantly. John's message brings us to a place most people prefer not to associate with Christmas, but maybe this is exactly where the gospel needs proclaiming today, maybe this is where we need to recognize God birthing salvation in our midst. Let us prepare the way of the One who will take all that is crooked and rough in us and the world, and make it smooth and right and filled with peace for all.