

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

John the Baptist is a herald of the saving Lord, whose way is prepared by “repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” As we hear the careful record of human leaders, we sense the spectrum of political and religious authority that will be challenged by this coming Lord.

¹In 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 Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as 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.

⁵Every 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;

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

How about hearing the news you've just won the lottery! Or it's a baby girl, or it's a baby boy, or it is twins? We are promoting you to a new position! You are going to receive a raise this year! You have won the sweepstakes! Yes – I will marry you! These are all messages that we most of the time would readily hear, celebrate, and even become very excited about.

What about these messages: I'm sorry to share the results of the medical test with you. I am sorry, but we are going to have to let you go. I hate to announce this, but our company has been sold. I think we would be better off to just be friends. I think I want to go it alone. You are overdrawn on your account. Well, it goes without saying that these messages are not so good, in fact most of the time, if not every time, it is horrible news to hear.

Think of your life this day - what in recent times have been the announcements of good news for you? What has come breaking through whether it is through others, or your faith, or other circumstances that has brought you hope for this world? On the other side of things what is it recently that has sent you crashing down? Is it the latest news of the day? Is it another mass shooting? Is it the constant divisiveness of our country? Is it words of the precariousness of one's income? Is it fears of health concerns? Is it the latest update on a family situation?

Today we come to the Sunday in Advent with those famous words: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" Each year we lift up this messenger, the forerunner, to

Jesus Christ; of course, that is the renowned figure of John the Baptist, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness prepare ye the way. Often when we hear the message to prepare in the season of Advent, our mind immediately goes to decorating, baking, buying gifts, cleaning the house, untangling for 17th time, that same string of lights that magically wraps itself and all kinds of contorted ways in the box over the last 11 months. The message of Advent and: I'll prepare - I'll watch, and I'll get ready, however, runs much deeper than just getting ready to celebrate the birth of Christ in 2018. It is deeper than family gatherings; it is deeper than the giving of gifts; it is deeper than how our house looks with the ornaments and lights blinking, it is deeper than the holiday meal together. The message of Advent is to watch, prepare, and get ready for Christ penetrating into our lives into our midst, once again, not just on one day of the year the 25th day of the 12th month, but instead in our daily journeys every day, every hour.

So, as we are now in this second Sunday of Advent, as we continue our journey in the Gospel of Luke, as we now once again in our church new year encounter this figure of John the Baptist; we read and hear his words as the messenger of the one who came to save us - and we ask ourselves how do we hear that proclamation, beckon us in the breaking of news this day, in the breaking moments as our life is unfolding this hour? Does it feel like someone has told us we have hit the lottery? Or is it more like the news that something bad has occurred? Or is occurring? Or will occur?

It seems the proclamation of the messenger of the Messiah, the words that he uses, and the quoting of a prophet of old, can again hit us, can again encounter us, can again come to us in unique ways each December. Because the reality is when we look carefully at those words,

for some it may feel like they are more hopeful; that this is good news, in fact, fantastic news. For others, however, the words of the messenger may feel like judgment, the news may come across like a pointing of the finger. The news may feel like someone is saying to you – you better get your act together.

I am wondering if in hearing these words of the locust and honey eating prophet, that it really can hit us as sort of both good news and bad news? Again: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” I guess if one is in a valley of life, hearing that it will be full is welcome news. If we are in a rough patch in a life predicament, hearing that God’s in breaking will make it smooth can offer us a glimpse of better days ahead. However, if we are fortunate enough to be on a mountain, maybe the words “being made low” do not sound so promising. Maybe if we are up to crooked things, being made straight may bend us out of shape.

I think the reality is that, when we look at the whole of our lives, when we look at the entirety of all the situations that we are in the midst of, of all the balls we are juggling in our day to day living, whether it be our jobs, our health concerns, our family, our households, our financial matters, our upcoming events, our deadlines, our vacations, our travels, our final exams, even our outlook and our moods, among all life’s crossroads, we are likely a treading through on multiple levels, in the middle of many different transitions. We have both mountains and valleys going on, both the rough and the smooth.

This is then both bad news and good news. Perhaps the bad news is that I know this world is bent on selfish ways, I know that most of the time I live in an area in which I am privileged to experience that as I rise each day I will have a roof over my head, I will have clothes to put on, and I will have food to eat. Maybe the news and proclamation of John the Baptist is a little unsettling then, because I know this world can do better, I know my country can do better, I know my community can do better, I know my neighborhood can do better, I know my workplace can do better, I know my family can do better, and I know, most of all, that I can do better.

However, this also can serve as a reminder of the good news, of the Gospel, of the over-arching message and meaning of what the arrival of Messiah means for me, for my family, and for this world. It reminds me that God is in control and God's promise and God's goal of bringing things into completion in God's eyes, in God's ways is indeed a hopeful message, in fact it can be a release, a relief, and ultimately is our hope.

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" The final phrase of that proclamation rings hopeful and true. "All flesh shall see the salvation of God," this is the ultimate Gospel message of the Advent season. God was, is, and will be involved all our lives, all the good news and the bad, all the highs and the lows, all the rough and the smooth, all the crooked and straight – and for that we say – "thank God." Amen.