

December 6, 2009 Advent II
Calvary Presbyterian Church
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Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 3: 1-6

On this second Sunday of the Advent Season, we turn our attention, as we always do, to John the Baptist. Here on the banks of the Jordan, where we meet John this morning, is the place where Mark's gospel begins. But Luke won't let us jump into the middle of the story like that. He insists that it's important for us to know where this John comes from—to understand his place in the long tradition of Israel.

Luke wants us to remember the story about an elderly priest, who had a terrifying encounter with an angel in the Temple in Jerusalem. Gabriel made an astounding—although biblically familiar—promise: that old Zechariah and his equally elderly wife, Elizabeth, would soon have a son who would be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit in order to prepare the people to meet their God. Zechariah was struck dumb in his amazement and disbelief.

Luke wants us to hear the song that old Zechariah sings at the birth of his son,

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet unto the way of peace.” (Luke 1:76-79)

Surely that's the first Advent song. One that just had to be sung before the angels could gather at Bethlehem to sing those other birthday songs that are so dear to our hearts.

One of the other characteristics of Luke's gospel is that everything is placed carefully in context. Luke is the one who begins by stating his intention to write an “orderly account” (1:1). And, our reading for this morning opens with an example of that, giving us the time and the place of his story. What's important here is that the Word of the Lord doesn't come to any of the notables whose names are recorded in the history books. The Word of the Lord doesn't come to anyone at all in important places like Rome or Jerusalem. The Word of the Lord comes to a man named John, somewhere out in the wilderness. Hear the Word of the Lord to you this day from Luke 3.

Highway Construction

Even before I heard the weather report for this weekend, I wasn't sure I'd be able to get here today. The flashing signs out on the beltway told me that the ramps from 495 to Telegraph Road would be closed—but I wasn't sure exactly when and I wasn't sure if the weather

yesterday would have interrupted the announced plans for yesterday or whether it would interrupt all our plans for today. I was late for my interview with your search committee last year because the beltway was completely shut down for reasons I never did figure out—I see progress, but it's been a year and it's still under construction. Road building is the one thing everyone around here has a definite opinion about. Do we need all these new roads or will more roads just bring more people and make the traffic worse? Traffic stories are probably our most common topic of conversation—nearly every church meeting begins with an assessment of how difficult it was to get here from wherever it was that you began your journey.

Although you would never suspect it from the TV ads, the road to Christmas does not begin at the Wal-Mart. It begins on the banks of the Jordan; listening to a man named John encouraging people get ready to meet their God. He walks around in the wilderness baptizing people—cleaning them up—so that they will be ready when God shows up in the neighborhood.

Ever since Adam and Eve hid out behind some bushes hoping that God wouldn't be able to find them, people in the Bible have had an ambivalent attitude about meeting God. We find them waiting eagerly to find God, and terrified by the possibility. When Moses realized it was God talking to him in that burning bush, "he hid his face for he was afraid to look at God" (Ex3:6). And when the people arrive at Mt Sinai, they sent Moses up that mountain into the fire and the smoke on their behalf; but they weren't going up there. They knew talking to God was dangerous, and they knew they weren't ready. Even Moses turned his back because he couldn't bear to look at God face to face. When the High Priest at the Temple in Jerusalem ventured into the holy of holies once a year on the Day of Atonement, they tied a rope around his waist—just in case they had to drag him back out again. God might refuse to accept the sacrifice for the accumulated sin of the community that year and give the priest what they all deserved. Sin created this barrier between people and God. We know who we are and who God wants us to be, and the gap between the two is frightening. Whenever God sends an envoy to talk to any human being, the first thing the angel says is always, "Do not be afraid." Such reassurance is always required.

The prophet, Malachi, knew that the people were not ready to meet their God. He was the Messenger—exactly what the name Malachi means—the one who was sent to help them get ready. His image of getting yourself ready was to walk into the fire—so that all the impurities in your life, all the useless stuff that clings to you so closely that it becomes a part of you, could be melted away until only the best, the purest, the truly righteous parts of you were left standing to meet your God—laser surgery—or maybe that's liposuction—for your soul. Malachi then offers us a second image of washing with the strongest laundry detergent so that all the contaminants that have accumulated during your lifetime can be scrubbed away from the image of God that was created within you. John's preparation out in the wilderness is in that same tradition. The people gathered to have that crust of sin and neglect washed away, so they would be ready. They are clearly not expecting to meet "the sweet little Jesus boy" lying in a manger; they are getting ready to meet the judge of all creation. They are getting ready for an encounter with the God who demands justice and righteousness from everyone—more than we can imagine—more than we could ever live up to.

“Repent and be baptized,” John calls. Unfortunately, “repent” has become such a tired old *church* word that calls up images of wild eyed preachers thumping their bibles and haranguing frightened souls about going to hell. It’s been pushed out of polite conversation—even theological conversation—because of its harsh and threatening sound. But the Greek word means to turn around, make another choice, go in a different direction. *Change your course. Reconsider your priorities. Don’t settle for what you know now. Imagine how your life could be. “Turn around to take hold of something new, something better than you have now.”*¹ *There has been a seismic shift in the order of creation, and it is about to become evident in our world. You’d better be ready, because it’s already coming. You haven’t seen it yet, but it’s almost here.* I think that was what John was promising out there in the Judean wilderness.

But this morning we don’t hear him talking about repentance at all. We hear him talking about highway construction. He is quoting the prophet Isaiah who originally wrote those words about building a royal highway—wide and level—straight through the desert for God to lead them in a triumphant procession back to the Temple in Jerusalem. The people were finally free to return home from their forced exile in Babylon, their faith purified, not by water from the Jordan River, but by their tears of regret as they languished in exile; waiting for God to ransom them from that lonely exile. Once again they found themselves wandering in the wilderness, far from the home that they knew, and far from where they believed God wanted them to be. In the Bible, it is in the wilderness that people encounter God. It’s when we are pushed outside of our own comfort zone—in the wilderness of uncertainty and fear that we are most likely to recognize the arrival of God, walking with us, even through the valley of the shadow of death. So we shouldn’t be surprised to find John out in the wilderness like the Old Testament prophets calling people to repentance—calling people to get themselves ready to meet their God.

John is not walking up and down the streets of Jerusalem, hoping that comfortable middle class, religious Jews will stop by and want to listen to what he has to say. It’s a long, steep winding road from the city down past Jericho, down further to the Jordan River. People didn’t skip out there for a Sabbath afternoon picnic. People would have had to really want to hear John—really feel a need for the baptism that he was offering. There’s something of a gap between what we think of as getting ready for Christmas—all that shopping and decorating and baking—and what John has in mind.

Prepare the way. Get those construction crews started or the highway won’t be ready in time. What will it take for you to get a suitable road built for the arrival of our Lord? Are you willing to pay the cost? Are you sure we need the road widened and straightened? The narrow winding path that we use to look for God now and then could just be weeded and sanded a little—maybe that would be enough? If we used it just a bit more it might really be a road, not a highway perhaps, but a usable road. You know how hard it is to really build a highway. You’ve seen how long it takes. How much will we need to invest to get the right of ways? Are you willing to pay the price? Is there a forest of clutter in our lives that will have to be chopped down first to make room? Or, maybe we will need to really explode some obstacle in our lives to clear the necessary space for this construction? Or, maybe we’ll have to pour a ton of concrete over our past mistakes before we can even begin? Highway construction isn’t for part-timers. It takes

¹ Gary Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, p 37.

commitment of all your resources to get the project completed on time, especially not knowing when “on time” might be.....

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem her penalty has been paid” (Is 40:1-2). Hear the good news, people of God. Rejoice, Emmanuel has come to us. God took on this huge construction project on our behalf. Christ has done all the heavy lifting for us. The seismic shift happened at the cross of Calvary—the valleys were lifted up and every mountain has been made low, the crooked road has been straightened out, and the highway has been completed on your behalf. You don’t have to be afraid ever again to stand before the creator of the universe, before the righteous judge of all humanity. God himself has closed the gap between us. The highway is straight and smooth and wide enough for us all.

You are only responsible for the access ramp. Prepare the way for the Lord—make the path straight. Prepare the way for the Lord—make the path straight. Straight through your pain and your tears, straight through your sin and neglect, straight through to your heart—all the way through the wilderness of Advent where we watch, and wait, again for the arrival of our Lord.