

“A Voice in the Wilderness”

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Luke 3:1-6

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, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ 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.

⁵ 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;

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

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

Luke begins our lesson for today by listing people in power.

Tiberius is starting his fifteenth year as Emperor of Rome.

Pontius Pilate is governor of Judea.

Herod is ruler of Galilee.

And so forth.

Notice I left off all those place names

that are hard to pronounce!

Doing that once was hard enough!

Indeed, we don't recognize most of the places and the people on this list.

But, in their day, those people were the movers and shakers of the ancient world.

Those places were important places.

If the message had come in our day, Luke's account would have read something like this:

"In the third year of Donald Trump when Nancy Pelosi was Speaker of the House in Washington and Pope Francis was in the Vatican, ...

...the word of the Lord came to a part time preacher who lived in Holopaw, Florida."

You get the idea.

Who would think that the word of the Lord would come to somebody in such a seemingly unimportant, out of the way place?

And yet that's exactly what happened.

The word of the Lord didn't come to the palace.
The word of the Lord didn't come to the Temple.

The word of the Lord came to John,
a voice crying in the wilderness.

This is the Gospel.
It's small and weak and easy to miss.

It's a voice crying in the wilderness...
...God's mercy disguised as human weakness.

Once again we see that, as Jesus said,
the Gospel really is like a mustard seed.
It creeps into our life,
seemingly small and insignificant.

But, it grows and spreads
and becomes a huge plant,
a place of refuge for those who need mercy.

This second Sunday of Advent
we learn that the gospel begins
with a voice in the wilderness.

Why? Why does the Word come to the wilderness of all places? What does this mean?

PREPARING THE WAY OF THE LORD

According to Luke,
John is a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

John would prepare the way of the Lord.

And how would he do it?
He would make a straight and level road.
He would fill in the valleys
and chop off the mountain tops.

We can actually do that now.
We have the technology.
It's possible to lop off the mountains
and fill in the valleys.
I've seen it.

But, it's really hard to do.
It takes a lot of time and money to accomplish.

And despite our advances in road building,
there are still some places where it is still quite impossible.

Some valleys that are just too deep,
Some mountains that are just too high.
Some roads are filled with boulders so great
that making a smooth road seems impossible.

Apparently that's true in the place where I live in sunny Florida. Those pot-holes just keep appearing.
A smooth road seems impossible to build.

SALVATION FROM EXILE

But, of course this passage is not really about amazing feats of civil engineering.

It's not really about building roads in the wilderness.
It's not about constructing a smooth, durable road.

It's a metaphor for God's salvation.

What will God's salvation be like?

It will be like a superhighway
in the middle of a mountainous and rocky desert.

It's like building a turnpike
through the Rocky Mountains.

When Isaiah first wrote these words,
God's people were in exile.

Last week we talked about
how Jerusalem and the Promised Land
had been devastated by the Babylonians.

Most of God's people had been taken as captives to Babylon.

A vast desert separated them from their homeland.

How could they ever make it back home?
The Babylonians would never voluntarily set their captives free.

And even if they did, most of the refugees wouldn't make it back home
through that wilderness.

The path was too steep.
It was winding and filled with giant boulders.

THE WILDERNESS

The vast expanse of wilderness that lay between God's people and the Promised Land was yet another symbol of just how completely they had been defeated.

The wilderness was not a place of salvation.
The wilderness was a place of danger and despair.
It was a place of death.

Or was it?

According to the prophet Isaiah,
this captive people needed to remember their own story.

Where does the story of God's salvation begin?
In the wilderness.

The story of salvation begins with liberated slaves wandering in the wilderness.
We call it the Exodus.

In the wilderness, they have no food or water.
In the wilderness, they are lost and have no idea where to go.

Sometimes they are so afraid that they want to return to a life of slavery in Egypt.
Even slavery would be better than dying of hunger and thirst in the wilderness.

They turn against their leader, Moses.

But, despite their lack of faith,
in the wilderness God makes a way where there seems to be no way.

God feeds his people.
God gives them something to drink.
God guides his people with a cloud by day
and a pillar of fire by night.

God makes a straight path in the desert.
He levels the mountaintops.
He fills in the valley.
He smooths the road.

It took 40 years.
But, eventually God's people made it to the Promised Land.

After all was said and done,
the wilderness proved to be the road to salvation
instead of the road to destruction.

And, says the prophet Isaiah,
this will be the case for God's people in exile.

God will make a way
when there seems to be no way.
God is building a superhighway in the wilderness.

And it happened just as the prophet said.
God's people were able to come back to the Promised Land.
God prepared the way.

ANOTHER VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

But, we learn today that the story wasn't over.
There's yet another voice proclaiming salvation in the wilderness.

God's Word of salvation is not limited
to just those mighty acts of God in the past.

Just as God's people found freedom from slavery and release from Exile,
God was making preparations for the next leg in the journey.

God's Word is living and active.
God's Word is busy creating
new highways in the desert.

God's Word is still preparing the way of salvation even today.

The word of God now comes
to a man named John, John the Baptist.
He speaks of a new day, a greater salvation.

A Messiah is coming.
And it's time to get ready for his arrival.

And how does John suggest that the people should prepare for the Messiah?
They should prepare through the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Repentance and forgiveness will put God's people on the path back home.
Repentance and forgiveness will deliver God's people from the wilderness.

In every age, God makes a way in the wilderness.
God makes a way when there seems to be no way.
God does what only God can do.

He fills in the valleys and lowers the mountains.
He makes the rough roads smooth.

But, we get to contribute
to that construction process.

The voice in our wilderness still points the way.

We prepare for the coming of the Messiah
by practicing the disciplines of confession and forgiveness.

If God made a way in the wilderness
for slaves escaping the tyranny of ancient Egypt,
if God made a way in the wilderness
for people in exile,
if God made a way in the wilderness
for those who heard John preach,

....then maybe God is still making a way for us in our wilderness.

The story continues, and we are part of that story.

God is still calling us to prepare
by repenting and asking for forgiveness.

THE MANGER SCENE

At our house, we prepare for Christmas by placing a nativity scene in our front yard.

The white cutouts snap together.
The holy family is in the background.
Miniature sheep graze in the foreground.

I like our manger scene because it's not too detailed.
The shapes suggest that there's more to come.
They symbolize the hope, but they leave a lot to the imagination.

We've thought about buying
some more figures for our display.
Perhaps we could get
some shepherds or an angel or two.
Maybe we could even add in some wise men for Three Kings Day.

But, the figure I would really like to add is
John the Baptist.

I know. Nobody makes a John the Baptist figure.
I would have to make him myself.

But, in my mind,
we really can't get prepared for Advent
unless we take a detour through the wilderness
and hear the preaching of John the Baptist.

I fantasize about doing this every year.
Maybe he would have long hair and a boney finger pointing toward the street.

We could hang a sign around his neck
that says, "Repent!"

I'd put John in the foreground, in front of the sheep and the holy family.

After all, he prepares the way.

Festive, right?

Maybe not.

I suspect the homeowners' association would complain.

Micky Mouse, the Abominable Snowman, and the Grinch that stole Christmas

... all that's okay, We know those stories.

But John the Baptist calling us to repent?

That doesn't sound like Christmas.

Very few people know that story.

It would be weird.

And yet the Christmas story is at its heart a tale of repentance and forgiveness.

The Christmas story really does begin with a voice crying in the wilderness, pleading with us to repent, to go in a different direction.

In a world where admitting fault
is seen as a weakness,
the prophet and the angels tell us that repentance is the way to peace on earth.

WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION

Each age presents new challenges
and reasons to repent.

I wonder.

What does the call to repent mean
in our day and time?

What does the voice crying in the wilderness say to us as we prepare once again for the coming of God's Messiah?

Does this strange character from the past have a Word for us today?

Is the Word of God still living and active even today in the land of email, Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, Wikipedia, and Snapchat?

Henry Brinton, a pastor in the Presbyterian Church, referred to these new forms of communication as "weapons of mass distraction".

He wrote,

"Has this ever happened to you?
You're cooking something on the stove when you hear a ping from your smartphone.

'Okay, while that's cooking I'll go see what that notification is about.

Oh no! That high school classmate is totally wrong.
I just have to reply.

That cat picture is so silly!
What a cool video!

And so forth...

Meanwhile in the kitchen ... five alarm fire."

Many people have written about the fact that social media has taken away our ability to really focus and think. We are constantly distracted.

And meanwhile, elsewhere in our life...
...there's a five alarm fire.

Carrollyn and I went to Epcot recently to see and hear the candlelight Christmas program.

That program hasn't changed in many years.
It's almost exactly the same program they used back
when our church's bell choir played in that program some 20 years ago.

And it's still very popular.

But, I noticed one thing
that has changed dramatically,
the people who watch the Christmas program.

Three quarters of them were on their phones...
... during the program.

Even the mass choir, the Voices of Liberty, a full orchestra, a celebrity host
and amazing lights and decorations were not enough to draw their attention
away from their phones!

Weapons of mass distraction.

Now I have to admit.
I need to repent as much as anyone on this.
When my phone pings, I just have to look.

If I hear that marimba sound,
I jump to see if it's my phone.

SPENDING SOME TIME IN THE WILDERNESS

But, maybe we need to learn to put down the phone.

Maybe we need to prepare for the coming of the Lord by once again embracing the value of quiet reflection.

The voice of salvation doesn't come to us on Facebook or Twitter.

God didn't send us an email to let us know that the Messiah was coming.

God sent a human being,
a voice crying in the wilderness.

John, that voice in the wilderness seems so out of place in our celebration of Christmas.

But, in the long run that voice in the wilderness proved to be more important, more powerful, and longer lasting than any other voice.

Kings and kingdoms have passed away, but that voice in the wilderness still speaks to us in ways that change our life.

Maybe it's time for us to spend a little time in that wilderness. Maybe we need to put our phone down long enough to recognize the ache in our own heart.

Maybe we need to take a hard look at the fact that we too are in exile.

We too are often separated from the ones we love, and we too are often separated from the One who comes.

The weapons of mass distraction have caused us to lose focus.

But, this Sunday, the second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist stands in front of the manger scene and gets our attention.

His shout echoes in the wilderness.
"Repent."

That message really does fit with Christmas. It really is a good way to start the church year...

... because it's not a shout of condemnation. It's a clarion call to go in a new direction.

Repentance means change. Change isn't possible if we believe that we're already living faithful lives.

That's never true...for any of us.

The way out of the wilderness begins by acknowledging our own sinfulness.

Repentance begins by confessing that everything isn't fine.

We are lost in our own wilderness.
We've been blown off course
and need a course correction.

Today we get some good news.

There's a new road being built in our wilderness.

The mountains will be leveled.
The valleys will be filled.
The rough places will be made smooth.

And this promise is for everyone.
Did you notice the last line in our lesson for today?

"All flesh shall see the salvation of God."
That means the whole world.
That means us.

To say it another way,

There's a voice crying in our wilderness.

The Messiah is coming to your home town.
And now is the time to get ready.

Amen.