



Roanoke, Virginia
Third Sunday of Advent, December 17, 2017

“Prepare the Way”

Luke 3:1-6

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Luke 3:1-6

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 Ituraea 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.

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.” ’

This past Thursday, George, Rachel, and I spent the day at Raleigh Court Presbyterian Church, planning the preaching year for 2018. You’ll be glad to hear we got a lot accomplished. During some downtime at lunch, we mused on the future of the mainline church and what the shape of things might be in the next 20 years or so. I jokingly made the comment that, given my work experience and education, I’m not cut out to be much more than a parish pastor – so things had not better go too far south for me. Rachel replied, “Well, there’s always street preaching.” Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. I’m not cut out for the cold.

Since that conversation, I’ve been thinking of a particular character from the 2002 film *Life or Something Like It*, every day at the corner of Fourth and Sanders streets in downtown Seattle, Prophet Jack climbs onto his crate, dramatically thrusts his arms into the air and looks up to the heavens, declaring, “I see and I say.”

The crux of the movie is when local TV reporter Lanie Kerrigan interviews Prophet Jack for a segment on her show. Tossing a few coins in his coffer, he gave her a disturbing message on live air. Prophet Jack prophesied that the Seattle Seahawks would beat the Denver Broncos 16-13, that it would hail the next day, and that on next Thursday Lanie would die. Lanie dismissed the street prophet with a laugh, until he looked her straight in the eye and said with all seriousness, “prophets don’t joke.” (You’ll

be relieved to hear that when Jack's first two prophecies came true, Lanie repented of her ways and reformed her life."

Prophet Jack, played by Tony Shalhoub, really wasn't that bad an imitation of a biblical prophet. In the Bible, prophets see with unusual clarity. They can see through the current events or circumstances of God's people, and then they hear a word from Yahweh to provoke the people to change – they "see" and they "say." Truthfully though, they do more "forth-telling" about the present than they do "fore-telling" about the future. Prophets are more prognosis than prediction. Their insight connects God's word with our world, explaining each to the other. Sometimes, they deliver words of rebuke. Other times, they offer words of social or political or economic analysis. Often times, like in our passage today, they give words of hope. And ultimately, prophets never joke.

For about a thousand years, God sent prophets to speak to God's people. Abraham was the first person to be called a prophet (Genesis 20:7), and with Moses Israel's prophetic institution took shape. For about a thousand years, the pattern was: God's people strayed, God sent a prophet, the prophet spoke God's word and the people got back in line . . . but then time passed, and the cycle repeated all over again. Between the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist, however, there was about a 450 year gap of prophetic silence. So, John, you see, is worth paying attention to in more ways than one.

Luke frames the scene by situating his narrative amid the historical figures of the day. Luke, more than any other of the evangelists, writes as an historian. Not exactly an historian of the twenty-first century, but rather an historian of the first century. This is back in the day when you wrote history to make a point, to teach a truth, and to draw people into the community narrative. That's exactly what Luke is doing here in chapter 3. He's placing the beginning of the Christian story into the history of the world.

Why does Luke bother to do this? As one theologian puts it, because he's got guts. He makes the bold claim that these seemingly small and insignificant events and people deserve to be placed alongside the world-shaking people and events of the day. Luke dares his readers to ask, "What does the birth of two small children, John and Jesus, have to do with kings, emperors, or governors?" Luke's reply, "Everything!"

That's the way it is with the Gospel. God's mercy comes disguised as human weakness. Two vulnerable children will grow up to change the world. An instrument of Roman torture will turn into the means by which God will reconcile the whole world.

So, Luke begins his story with the outrageous claim that God is at work in the weak and small. Babies and barren women, unwed mothers and wild-eyed prophets, itinerant preachers and executed criminals will change the world. And God's not done yet. Luke dares us to ask how God works through unlikely characters today. What might unpopular teens and out-of-work adults, corporate lawyers and stay-at-home parents say or do to announce the news of God's redemption?

John is a surprising intrusion into the ordinary. Advent, likewise, is meant to be an intrusion into our ordinary. It calls us to remember the way God intruded graciously into human history through Israel and then through Jesus. And it calls us to look for the way God intrudes today.

At home, we are cleaning, preparing for guests, and wrapping gifts. Presbyterian minister Kathy Beach-Verhey writes that when she was a teenager, she used to tease her mother about some of her preparations for company. Her mother would get down on her hands and knees and comb the fringe of the oriental carpets so that there were no knots and the entire fringe was perfectly lined up. It looked so neat and beautiful when she finished. She tried to point out to her mother, however, that one kick or shuffle from the guests' feet and the beautifully arranged fringe would all be in disarray again. But that didn't matter to her mother. She wanted everything, down to the fringe on the carpet, to be perfect for her guests. She attended to every detail.

The advent of guests prompts us to not only to straighten up, but to fix that broken doorknob on the hall door, install the new towel rack in the bathroom, or replace the burned-out light bulb in the

guest bedroom. Preparing for company causes us to look at our home, to examine our surroundings with a whole new perspective. Suddenly, the blinds are too dusty, countertops are too messy, and the silver is tarnished. Preparing for guests demands self-examination.

John the Baptist doesn't seem like the kind of person who would have understood all that is involved in welcoming guests into one's home. But if John wasn't thoughtfully straightening up living rooms and rug fringes, he did understand how a people ought to prepare to welcome their God. His bold preaching in the wilderness called people to preparation. His challenging words called people to self-examination. John's prophetic message called people to get ready, prepare the way for Jesus.

John's challenge is to repent and prepare. True repentance (*metanoia* in Greek) means literally to change one's mind, to turn around. Reorienting oneself is not an easy process. There is pain involved in refining and cleansing. There is pain involved in dying and rising. But it is a process that is designed for our good, and for our well-being, to prepare us for the coming of the Lord. God comes into our midst as Emmanuel, comes to destroy the evil in us and in the world, comes to draw us out of death into life.

God can't come into the world and leave the world unchanged. God cannot come to us and leave us unchanged. It's not as if God is coming to us to say, "Your time is up and I'm going to make you pay for the things you've done wrong." But it is that God has come into our world for the purpose of transforming it. And in his sheer coming, in the coming of Jesus, there is going to be an upending.

Each year, during the weeks of Advent, we light the candles of peace, hope, love and joy – and we pretend we have these gifts already. But the truth is that we still yearn for what stands under those names: peace, hope, love, and joy. Advent invites us to take a chance to seek out that for which we deeply yearn and do not have. We long for these things, and we long for the Advent of the Lord, and yet we fear it, too.

We live in a culture that expects things to turn out well, but we know that things do not always turn out well. We all die, we get sick, we experience destruction and disappointment in our lives and in our families. And we console ourselves that this is just our reality, that this is all that there is. But in doing that, we are holding onto a false answer. What God does with Advent is he tells us not to take what appears real as all that there is. At Advent, we are reminded that we need refining – that we need to prepare the way within our own lives to allow God to awaken a desire within us for the impossible.

Advent is a time when we can say that the way things are is not enough. What God wants for us far exceeds what is within our experience. Only when we allow God to intrude in our lives, to come into our homes, our work, our relationships, only then can we break loose and rejoice that God straightens out what is crooked and smooths over the rough places, all in order to build a direct path by which God can bring us God's love and mercy.

By the time the first Christians were reading Luke's verses, none of the seven political or religious who's who he mentions are still alive, yet the people are still telling the story of John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ. Today, those seven proud and powerful men are just footnotes in the story of Christ. God has raised up the insignificant, and polished out of it silver and gold.

There are times when we, too, feel insignificant and small, surrounded by worldly problems and challenges. Maybe it is not an emperor that makes life miserable, but a difficult colleague or a struggling marriage, a struggle with addiction, or bullies, or depression, grief, or loneliness.

Whatever it may be, Luke shares the good news promise that this is not the only reality God has planned for us.

The waiting of Advent can be hard, but God will keep God's promises. The hope, love, peace, and joy we yearn for will be ours, but we must prepare and ready ourselves for the change Christ ushers in. We must prepare the way, for:

In the seventeenth year of the twenty-first century, when Donald Trump was president of the United States, and Terry McAuliffe was the governor of Virginia, and Sherman Lea the mayor of Roanoke, and Denise Anderson and Jan Edmiston were the moderators of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Word of the Lord came to Second Presbyterian Church in Roanoke, VA.