



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 9, 2018
MALACHI 3:1-4; CANTICLE, LUKE 1:68-79; PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11; LUKE 3:1-6

ARE YOU SURE?

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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 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.

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.'"]

Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths!

In today's gospel we heard these words in the third chapter of Luke. But our readings also had verses from the first chapter of Luke, because that's where the Canticle of Zechariah that we read in the place of the psalm came from – the song of joy that bursts out from the father of John the Baptist in the naming of his son and proclaiming how John will be a prophet. "You, my child, shall be called

the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way."

But today's gospel reading about John is some decades after that. This gospel is about not John the baby, but full-grown John the Baptist, the now-adult son of whom Zechariah had sung – John, living into his role as prophet, fulfilling the words of Isaiah as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: *Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths!*

But do you think that John's father thought his son would *literally* become a wild man out in the wilderness? I don't imagine that's how Zechariah envisioned John's call, when that joyful canticle that his son would be a prophet burst from his lips.

I don't imagine other people, either, would have looked first for the unkempt smelly guy from the borderlands. But when Luke was writing his Gospel, he very intentionally made sure John the Baptist was connected to the mighty prophets of old, introducing John by rolling the credits about the powers of the era. Why do we need to hear it was fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius; and of Pontius Pilate and Herod; and Herod's brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and all? Why these austere, powerful names at the beginning of chapter three in Luke's Gospel?

They're not just there to strike fear in the heart of the person who would have to read these names out loud in church! They meant something to the people because it's a way many of the ancient prophets of Israel announced themselves:

Isaiah tells us that he served as a prophet "during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah." The book of Jeremiah says, "The word of the LORD came to him in the

thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah."

Luke introduces John in the way the Hebrew Scriptures introduced prophets, establishing John's creds, so to speak, in a recognizable way – and more so, establishing John's continuity with the prophets of old: this actual voice in the wilderness IS the one the prophets spoke of. So when John says, "Prepare the way of the Lord," you had better get ready for the Messiah! Prophecies are coming true in your day!

Some *cues* are there in Luke, because what was happening was not what they might have expected. The message comes from the edges. But it IS clear what this prophet's message is: it's to clear the road for the one who's coming! That's what John is doing. And it was time; the road needed clearing. But when wouldn't that have been true? Why should the people pay attention to John, after 400 years of "silence," so to speak, from the prophets of Israel, when all along, and still, right up to our time, there was and is plenty in the road that needs clearing? Luke calls up the towering prophet Isaiah to legitimize and lay claim to John's time as:

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."

But...how could they be sure? I'm taking a class down at St. Placid Priory in Lacey, and exploring ways we recognize the Spirit at work in our hearts and in our lives. Some of my classmates talk very concretely about what they experience of Jesus, how they "hear" Jesus. My experience isn't as loud as some of theirs, and I confess to you, I sometimes am confounded by that – and by confounded, I mean both curious and envious. But one day, I shared about how my practice is to pray for Jesus to be with us and guide us when I'm ministering with someone in a difficult situation. And one of my classmates said, "And does he answer you?" And I immediately said, "NO!" It just burst out, because I don't feel like I'm getting the concrete answer that I would like to instruct Jesus to give me. ...*Has anyone else ever felt that way?*

But then another woman, sitting off in a quiet corner of the room, looked me right in the eye and said, "Are you *sure*?"

And I knew THAT was Jesus, in Karen's eyes and gentle voice. *Are you sure you're not hearing from me?* There Jesus was! I can't explain it better than that, but it was a powerful Ah-HAH moment, God saying, "YOU do know me." And I realized, I do. But,

wow, I had some path clearing to do. Of my expectations of how I want this relationship with the Divine to go. Of my thinking God isn't really talking to me right now, because it's not the way I would write the script.

Well...the voice of one crying in the wilderness – not the way you'd write the script for the herald of the Son of God, right? Or the voice of one asking in the corner, *Are you sure?* when you say you don't hear Jesus answer.

What is in the way of recognizing God's presence in *your* life? Are you like me, and can build up too many expectations of what that's supposed to look like, according to YOU? Are we trying to control the relationship with God? Clear the road!

Clear it from our own expectations of what the Spirit ought to be sounding like, and recognize the Spirit drawing us in in her own way. Because there's not just one way. And it won't be the same way for you or me as it is for somebody else – and it most certainly isn't according to some expectation I concoct for myself. Prepare the way of the Lord. Clear away trying to direct how Jesus comes to us, and give him a clear path into your heart.

So many of us identify as spiritual seekers, yearning for deeper relationship with the Divine. That's our work here in Advent – to clear a path to welcome Jesus anew, but also to recognize the Jesus who is already here and continually coming, because we are inexorably drawn in by God's love.

Reframe your seeking. If you're feeling deep yearning, it's not because you're not in relationship with the Spirit. It's because God's love never stops drawing you. No matter how close we get, we will always want more! "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee," right? So don't get bogged down there, feeling the yearning as a negative. Lean into the yearning, and open your heart to the experience that you ARE recognizing God – if you clear the path of your expectations of what God, and relationship with God, *should* look like.

The deeper you get, the more you yearn. Let that be our cue as Christians. That's a profound thing. It will not stop. Jesus keeps coming and we are being sought after in love. Can we turn our gaze to the wilderness, to the wild-haired, to the baby in the manger, to the places in our lives where we wouldn't expect in our own day? When that happens for us, when we tune in, when we make space, when we start listening or shift our inward *and* outward gaze in a way we're not used to, we clear the path – and there's God, who has always been right there!

The prophets don't look like we'd have them look. Jesus doesn't come the way we'd have him come. We don't get our answers the way we would script them. But people were still drawn to the Jordan in droves for the baptism of John, and we are here in this church – and out in the world – living out our call as Jesus people, preparing our hearts in Advent for our God who comes to us as a vulnerable baby, knowing that IS the answer we are listening for. The Word made flesh, dwelling among us.

Ruth Stone wrote, "Don't confuse hunger with greed."¹ We always need more God! And don't confuse yearning for more connection with Jesus as absence of connection. Lean into the yearning for more God – that is ever our Advent preparation. We're waiting for Jesus. Recognize him already here, always drawing you with his love.

¹Ruth Stone, "Advice," in *Cries of the Spirit*, ed. Marilyn Sewell (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991), 37.

