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2nd Sunday in Advent – December 5, 2021

Luke 3:1-6

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, 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.’”

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we continue in this season of Advent, we are jumping all over the gospel of Luke – starting out last week with a section from near the end of that text, and then today rushing back to almost the beginning of this gospel account. That is characteristic of this season, as we always start Advent by looking forward to texts that allude to when Jesus is coming back again, before we backtrack to the story of John who prepared the way when Jesus first came to earth.

In just the first 3 chapters of Luke we have an almost 30-year jump from the foretelling and birth of both Jesus and John to today’s text – adult John out in the wilderness telling people to prepare the way of the Lord for the coming Messiah (with one bonus story of the 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple). Many have wondered what happened during these years and why these details weren’t included in these accounts of Jesus’ life. Perhaps Jesus’ early life was “common” and unworthy of inclusion in the story of God’s salvation of the world. Or maybe

the gospel writers had a focus and plan for their narration, and these early years didn't add anything to that agenda.

For Luke, that may have been the case, as the 30-year gap makes it easy for readers to connect the prophecy about John in chapter 1, when the angel of the Lord said this about John to his father, Zechariah: “for he will be great in the sight of the Lord... He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (John 1:15-17). Which was then echoed in the words Zechariah said at John's birth, “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.” (John 1:76-77). Bringing us to what we heard in today's reading from chapter 3 when this prophecy is fulfilled (and we will hear more about John in next week's gospel).

And speaking of gaps, there was about a 700-year span between the announcement of the coming Messiah and Jesus' arrival, so Luke reinforces divine fulfillment further by citing the prophet Isaiah as he described John as “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord ...’,” (John 3:4-6). In this text we see John the Baptist as a threshold figure, a prophet standing in the gap between Israel's prophets of old (like Isaiah) and the promised prophet and Messiah to come (Jesus).

Given this connection to the prophetic tradition, it's not surprising that the word of God comes to John “in the wilderness” (3:2). The significance of the wilderness was established in Jewish tradition long before John the Baptist showed up there. The Hebrew scriptures portrays the wilderness as a place of desolation and scarcity, but also (counter-intuitively, perhaps) as a place of safety and divine provision. Think, for example, of God's interventions as Moses leads the people of

Israel through their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, as the young David runs to the desert to escape Saul's wrath, or as the prophet Elijah flees from persecution into the wilderness. Wilderness imagery also permeates prophetic texts, and includes promise of abundance and joy such as Isaiah 35:1: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom ...".

Even John did not just suddenly appear in the wilderness. We might overlook this detail in Luke 1:80: "The child [John] grew and became strong in spirit, and he was *in the wilderness* until the day he appeared publicly to Israel." Luke suggests that his growth and spiritual strength actually developed there before he become the forerunner to Jesus.

This is a hopeful and necessary message for us today. It doesn't take much effort to imagine our world as a desert. Scarcity, isolation, hunger, and violence seem to rule the day. Many churches have been questioning their viability and future as communities of faith given a declining amount of resources and energy for mission, and that was before the impacts of the pandemic caused some of this decline to intensify. The pain and injustice around us can make us wonder whether God is at work in this wilderness. But Luke suggests that the wilderness is precisely where God provides what we need, so that we can now be the ones "crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"

Our moments and seasons in the wilderness are the times we can be especially aware of how God is at work. This was true for Jesus as we see this same kind of wilderness theme throughout the Gospel. "Led by the Spirit into the wilderness" (4:1), Jesus withstands the devil's temptations and returns "filled with the power of the Spirit" to enter into public ministry (4:14). Again and again, when people's needs and demands increase, Jesus withdraws to deserted places to commune with God: "But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad;

many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.” (John 5:15-16)

Jesus teaches his disciples to do the same. After their return from missionary activities, “he took them with him and *withdrew privately* to a city called Bethsaida” (9:10). In order to be able to carry on ministry, Jesus -- and his followers, then and now -- need the space, solitude, and divine provision found in the wilderness. It is in the wilderness that we can be free from our distractions and daily activities of life to pray and listen for God’s leading. It is in the wilderness that we can be reminded of God’s care and concern for us in giving us our daily bread and spiritual nourishment. It is in the wilderness season of Advent that we pause in our journey to prepare for and reflect on the coming celebration of the greatest gift ever given to this world. And it is in the wilderness that we can let go of the things that hold us back or try and control us so that our hearts and minds can be open, and we can be free to follow where God leads us – even if that is into a new land.

Wherever your wilderness wandering may lead you, know that you do not make that journey alone. The Holy Spirit guides and accompanies you, as do the whole people of God. As we continue in this season, may we keep our eyes and hearts open so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

In this season of watching and waiting, let us pray for all people and places that yearn for God’s presence.

A brief silence.

You send messengers into the world to proclaim the day of your coming. Make our bishops, pastors, deacons, and lay preachers confident in their preaching, that their words and our lives witness to your grace. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Send your Spirit to all living creatures that are endangered. Provide them with shelter and care, and bring us into right relationship with the earth that you create and call good. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Send leaders to our nations, cities, schools, and businesses to work on behalf of those who have lost parents, spouses, and loved ones; immigrants; the imprisoned; those living in poverty; and all who are oppressed. Make them bold in their commitments to justice and reconciliation. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Send your servants to care for those who suffer. Use our ministries and our lives to reach out with compassion to those who are hungry, oppressed, lonely, or ill. Grant them healing and wholeness. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Send prophets to speak difficult truths, even when they are poorly received. Embolden those who ask hard questions and challenge accepted ways. Instill in youth and elders alike a passion for pointing to Jesus in all things. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

We remember your saints, both those publicly celebrated and those more humbly remembered. Confident that your work will be completed, we live in faith until the day of your coming. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

God of new life, you come among us in the places we least expect. Receive these prayers and those of our hearts, in the name of Jesus.
Amen.

Blessing

The God of hope
fill us with all joy and peace in believing,
so that we may abound in hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit,
through Christ Jesus for whom we wait.

Amen.