

December 8, 2024
“A Way in the Wilderness”
Luke 1:68-79 / 3:1-6
Pastor Tim

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the HOLY ONE, make God's 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.'”

That, friends, is pure poetry.

In a world so full of deep and despairing valleys and seemingly insurmountable mountains, in a world full of so much that is crooked and rough, it is a prophetic, beautifully illustrative vision of what is yet possible. Of what justice and peace look like—those same valleys filled, mountains made low, crooked places made straight and rough ways made smooth.

That is what the WAY of the HOLY ONE looks like. And it all begins with preparation. Intention.

That is spirit, the call, at the heart of Advent – the season of expectant waiting, but a season of active, forward-leaning waiting, of readying (again) our hearts and our minds, our lives, to help make way for THE WAY – the WAY of the HOLY ONE. The Way that Jesus' extraordinary life and life-giving death so powerfully remind us is marked by love and justice.

And what is particularly compelling about this poetic, PROphetic vision, is FIRST, TO WHOM it comes. And as importantly, to whom it DOES NOT come.

As the author of Luke's gospel VERY INTENTIONALLY notes, in his narrative, story-telling style as we've been exploring in our Bible study, this in the opening of our second reading, the vision DOES NOT COME to the Roman emperor Tiberius Caesar. It does not come to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. It does not come to the regional Jewish rulers, Herod or his brother Philip, or Lysanias. It does not come to the Jewish high priests, Annas and Caiaphas.

It comes to John.

John, the lowly, locust- and honey-eating, camel hair-wearing nomadic preacher. John the baptizer as he has become known, doing the work of preparation to which he was called, to which we all are called—work that, in the midst of Empire, will eventually cost him his life. As it eventually will Jesus'.

And before John, as noted in our reading, it came to Isaiah, the 8th-century prophet. The one who overcomes his own sense of inadequacy to respond to God's call: "Hear am I. Send me." The one who becomes an unexpected messenger of God to confront injustice among his own people, to confront kings in the injustice of their power, in the midst of an expanding and oppressive Assyrian empire.

It is John, of course, who sets the stage for Jesus, who points to and prepares the way for the WAY that Jesus embodies in life and in death.

John preaches a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sin—or RELEASE from sin is probably a better translation of the Greek word, *aphesis*, used here. Sin itself understood as a form of captivity, so RELEASE from anything and everything that holds us captive, that separates and isolates us, individually and collectively, from the God of Love and that divine Love in each other and in ourselves.

And with *aphesis*, RELEASE, the invitation and opportunity to turn back—again, always—to God, and to God IN each other as in ourselves. To turn back to Love, and love FOR each other as for ourselves.

The WAY.

And what is also compelling about the poetic, PROphetic vision, is WHERE it comes. Or as importantly, where it DOES NOT come.

Again, with Luke's historical grounding in the political and religious context of Roman Empire, it DOES NOT come in the halls of political power or religious authority.

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, 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."

In the WILDERNESS. It comes in the wilderness—in this case, very much in the midst of Empire. Under the thumb of Empire. Of all places.

That is the hope, the hope with claws that Cara preached about last week to begin our Advent journey. The Advent hope that roots itself in places where we least expect it, but where it's most needed. In the valleys of our lives and of the world too deep and the mountains too high. In the crooked and rough places of our hearts and our minds and our lives and of the world we share together.

"... how hard it must be," wrote Albert Camus, "to live only with what one knows and what one remembers, and deprived of what one hopes ..."

Active, forward-leaning hopes feeding our collective hope, that makes way for THE WAY. The WAY John begins to describe, just beyond our reading, to those asking what they must do to participate in the vision. To bear fruit, as he says, worthy of repentance.

He gets downright practical, pointing to specific acts of compassion and love, of fairness and integrity in vocation and in relationship: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise."

To tax collectors asking—those most hated by Jews because they were fellow Jews operating at the behest of the Roman Empire, and known to exploit their privileged position—he says: "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

And to Roman soldiers asking—those actually wielding the weapons of Empire—he says: "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

It's just a start, charity leading to justice, but it all points to THE WAY. The vision of common good, of compassion and love, of justice and peace.

And speaking of peace, that is exactly how Zechariah describes THE WAY, in his own vision, his own song – what we heard in our first reading this morning.

Zechariah, a priest himself and father of the aforementioned John. Zechariah, who you may know in the story, who had been rendered mute the previous nine months and change—a spiritual gestation period.

And why? Because, as detailed earlier in the first chapter of Luke, the angel Gabriel appears to him and Zechariah is terrified, overwhelmed with fear. Gabriel tries to calm his fear and then pronounces that his wife, Elizabeth, will become pregnant and bear a son, to be named John.

An answer to his prayer, for sure, but an entirely unexpected answer because Elizabeth—like Sarah and other biblical women before her—is barren and of advanced age.

So Zechariah is understandably skeptical: “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting up in years.”

And BECAUSE he doesn't believe the good news, because he has no faith, and so no hope that what the angel is telling him is even possible, his ability to share that good news is taken away. He remains unable to speak until John is born.

And so after John is born, now filled with the Spirit, Zechariah's voice erupts in pent-up praise and hope:

“And you, child (referring to his newborn son, John), will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the HOLY ONE to prepare God's ways, to give God's people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The dawn from on high here, by the way, the dawn of the light that shines in the shadow of death, echoes the Psalmist and the prophet, Isaiah, alluding to a promised liberation of those imprisoned, freed from the darkness of captivity. Those imprisoned in one form or another.

Hope that leads to release from all that holds us captive—as we noted before in considering repentance and forgiveness of sin. All that separates and isolates us,

individually and collectively, from the God of Love and that divine Love in each other and in ourselves.

Hope that leads us back to love. And so to justice. And so to peace.

That Albert Camus quote I shared earlier, “how hard it must be to live only with what one knows and what one remembers, and deprived of what one hopes ...,” continues: “... there is no peace without hope.”

There can be no peace without hope. And there can be no justice without peace.

THE WAY marked by common good, compassion and love, justice and peace, begins with faith-fueled hope. As the apostle Paul put it, in his letter to the Corinthian church, “And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.”

Love is THE WAY that leads to justice. That leads to peace.

Friends, may we, like John and Isaiah before him, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, like all those prophets and saints who have gone before us, play our parts in preparing the way for THE WAY.

In the sometimes overwhelming and utterly despairing wilderness of our lives and of the world, of all places, may we hold onto possibility.

May we find the faith, and so the hope, that leads us—again and again and again—back to love.

And rooted in that love, may we find the courage to cry out and act toward the poetic and PROphetic vision where “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.”

May it be so.