

Prepare by Looking Backwards and Forwards

King of Glory Lutheran Church

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Advent 2: Year C: Gospel Luke 3, First Lesson

Luke 3:1-6

¹ 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.’ ”

Luke 1:68-79: sung by Zechariah, the priest after his son, John the Baptist was born

⁶⁸“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Zechariah, Mary and John the Baptist knew how to lead people in preparing their hearts. They called upon us to look back...and look forward to see God's salvation.

God's grace be upon each of you this day. Amen.

How are your Advent and Christmas preparations going? Thank you to all who helped make our sanctuary so lovely with Christmas trees and decorations. We get ready for the holiday by participating in the rituals we've done for so many years. The tree comes out of the basement, the ornaments and stockings get hung, we sing along to carols and it feels great.

It feels great, because we are a people grounded in rituals and traditions both secular and sacred. We feel best when re-enacting these preparations that tell our hearts and minds, "Get ready! Jesus is coming!"

You and I, we prepare all the time. We prepare for the next meal, or the upcoming meeting, or to say hello, goodbye, or the next bills that need to be paid.

John the Baptist was the one who prepared the people for Jesus' arrival. Calling them out to the wilderness, where typically militaristic groups would ready themselves, John preaches repentance. Rev. Dr. Matt Skinner asserts that particularly in Luke-Acts, the word repentance does not mean, stop doing all those bad things and just shape up. He says, that repentance means having an awareness a recognition to the present moment where God is acting. Repentance is recognizing the truth about yourself, it's about adopting a new perspective.

John the Baptist might not agree, as we'll hear next week, his words are quite harsh. But for now, this week, our two texts illuminate how the humans God places in this story, become quite aware of what is unfolding in front of them. They see and know God's presence now. By looking backwards and forwards.

My Aunt Bett always said, 'We know who we are by knowing where we've come from.' Bett was one of those women in my life who always gave me perspective because she had family history and experience that I didn't have. That other family members didn't have. Her story was important as it illuminated my unfolding story. I'm guessing there is someone like that in your life too. 'We know who we are by knowing where we've come from.'

Therefore let's leave John preaching in the wilderness momentarily and go back in time to John's own mother Elizabeth, her husband Zechariah and kinswoman, Mary the mother of Jesus.

When Mary accepted God's divine appointment to carry the Son of God within her womb, she breaks into song. She sings of how God will turn the world upside-down and make it right-side-up with the arrival of the child within her. The rich will become poor, the powerful will be made low. She has a recognition - or repentance of God's actions in this present moment.

When Mary sings this song, she's actually in her cousin Elizabeth's living room and Zechariah is listening. Living in an honor/shame culture, Mary runs away to the hill country when learning of her pregnancy out of wedlock. God has not only been active in Mary's life but also the more senior and barren, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth too, is pregnant. Her white-haired husband, priest Zechariah, cannot believe, will not believe, angel Gabriel's news that he and Elizabeth will soon be parents. For this unbelief, he is made mute for the remaining months of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

But when the time comes for baby John to be named, Zechariah's voice returns and he sings the song of our first lesson. "Blessed are you, lord, the God of Israel, you have come to your people and set them free. Through your holy prophets, you promised of old to save us from our enemies to remember your holy covenant. This was the oath you swore to Abraham." Hear how he is looking backwards yet fully aware of God's activity in the present moment?

Then he looks forward. "And you child (John the Baptist), will go before the Lord to prepare the way." Then Zechariah looks even farther forward into the future. "The dawn from on high shall break upon us to shine on those who dwell in darkness, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Mary had an awareness, a recognition of what the baby Jesus would bring about upon his arrival. Zachariah further enlarged that vision. This is a family who is grounded in memory (the past) and promise (the future), giving God credit for all of it. They can recall, recite and even sing of the wonders of salvation for their forebearers and for their future grandchildren. These are families that are resilient and courageous. Families who can withstand trials and trouble when that day comes. ⁱ

Earlier this week, I was helping a friend in Iowa decorate her Christmas tree. She had the most amazing, hand-made ornaments. They were cloth angels and snowmen, made with the tiniest little beads sewn on. Her great-grandmother had made them. I wondered how many Christmas trees these ornaments had hung on. What were the stories they might tell if they could speak? Children being born, crops being lost, calves being birthed and dying each season. What an incredible legacy. It was a God moment to reflect upon the family generations I held in my hand. We know who we are, when we know where and whom we've come from.

John the Baptist is still preaching in the wilderness, so we better listen in, now that we've remembered his Dad's story. 'Every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill be made low, the rough ways made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' John 2 keen awareness of what is about to take place. The salvation of God is coming! It is not a salvation to be waited for, and hoped for, it is to be revealed upon Jesus arrival. All flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

Our Advent and Christmas preparations lead our hearts to look back over time. "Remember the Christmas when..." But also, we peer into the future, as we will soon peek over the cattle trough to see baby Jesus.

This week, as we continue our Christmas preparations, I'm inviting us to reflect upon how the God of the past, present and future, is being revealed in Jesus right now – this very moment. Can you see it? Can we see Him? What truths does God want you to know about yourself and Christmas? What are the truths God desires us to hold fast to so we can be resilient and courageous?

Your spouse holding your hand as you pray with your Advent wreath. Your grandchildren excitedly telling you what they hope Santa will bring. Your community or church spreading kindness and light in these darkened months. There is repentance. There is God, behind and before! Amen.

ⁱ Richard Swanson. Prof of Religion, Emeritus, Augustana College. Working preacher. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-168-79-9>. 2024.