

## **Promise in the Wilderness**

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Luke 3:1-6; Malachi 3:1-4

The Rev. Damaris D. Whittaker

*“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, <sup>2</sup>during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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; <sup>6</sup>and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”*

*~ Luke 3:1-6*

Years ago, I visited with a family. They had a five-year old girl. I arrived, I sat down, and after a few minutes, the little girl came over to greet me, and she said, “Pastora (Pastor), I have been waiting for you. Would you come to my room.” I responded that I would stop by before I left.

Surely, as I concluded my visit, her mother and I stopped in her room. When I entered, there were toys everywhere: On the floor, on the bed, on every surface. She repeated again, “I was waiting for you” as I stood there, looking around. Even now, I remember thinking that if this child were to think as an adult, perhaps her way of waiting for me would have included picking up all of her toys and cleaning her room -- making sure that everything was perfect. But she just wanted to show me her room, just the way it was. She just wanted me to come in.

How many times, when we are expecting company, do we go on what some would call “crazy cleaning mode?” How many times have we said to friends and family - - do not come, my house is a mess? How many moments we have lost with loved ones, on the count of a messy house?

Good people of Center Church, let us admit it together this morning - it is possible that we may go a little “crazy.” During this time of year, more so than usual. I have heard some say, “I had to leave the house because if I stayed my spouse would have cleaned me too.”

Advent is about preparation. That preparation, for us, means to look inward, bypassing the mess that may be surrounding us. God often comes to us when our reality is messy.

Our Gospel lesson this morning begins with a list of names. One can almost hear the congregation's mind leaving the room when the scripture readings contain lists of names. As some might say, we "check out" during those scriptures.

But, Luke sets the stage for us by historically framing what is happening when John comes to the scene as the preparer of the way of the Lord. Luke writes self-consciously as a historian. But a historian of the first century -- a time when people wrote history to make a point, or to teach a truth or a lesson.

The story begins with a roll call of important persons: Governors and kings, even the high priest. Here is staging the arrival of "the Word of God," not just in a physical wilderness in the proximities of the Jordan, but in the wilderness of the political world, during the reigns of emperor Tiberious, governor Pilate, ruler Herod and priests Annas and Caiaphas (two priests that were subject to annual re-election by the Roman authority.) The Word comes to John in the midst of a messy reality of a world defined by both secular and religious powers.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, the word of God comes, not to those important figures, but to an unknown prophet out in the wilderness. John is the one who is out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord.

So, Luke begins this story claiming that God works through the otherwise perceived as weak, small, unknown. The word of God comes out of nothing, to those who might be considered to be nothing, and becomes something permanent. John is the fulfillment of the promise of God.

And John's message starts with repentance. Armed with God's word, John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and preparing people for the savior who is to come. John did not start with the details of how salvation would be implementing; he started with repentance.

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary by Karl Jacobson

John did not lead us to clean up or to pick up the mess -- the mess that may be in our own personal lives or our reality in our world. He called us first to repent. The underlying Greek word means “changing the mind” or “turning around.” This time, changing our minds and turning around towards God.

C.S. Lewis describes repentance as a process of surrender, the only way out of a hole. Lewis says that this repentance is not something God demands of you before God will take you back...is just a description of what going back to God is like.

John is inviting us to anticipate Jesus, to let him come and meet you where you are.

But this morning, Center Church, I want to invite us to surrender, yes. To look inward, yes. To repent, yes.

But let us go a little further and consider, what would it mean for us to be a voice in the wilderness at this time? How do we find our voice in the wilderness, now?

At a time when our country is suffering from political dysfunction; it is almost unbelievable, but even today, we are still reading about human trafficking and slavery in our communities.

We cannot open the paper without seeing the images of war and desolation in the world. We continue to worry about the violence in Gaza and Israel, Egypt and so many other places. So many here at home continue to live with illness, poverty and addiction.

We are concerned about the youth and children and parents. We are alarmed at the reports from DCF, about the unpromising future of the 18 year olds who age out of the system. So many issues that afflict our world!

And yet, we gather here in this beautiful space in this city. At a time that, after all one may argue, many not be much different than John’s time, when people were living under the Roman empire. And I can say that God is not far from us.

Here, we prepare--we gather--we re-group--we wait for the promise. We go back out into the world, finding our voice in the wilderness. Here, in this corner of Main and Gold, we provide light, hope, and love for those who, just like us, want to find the Peace of God.

In the midst of the time, when all we hear about is this “Christmas Magic,” let us be the voice that talks about God’s promise. Let us be the voice that talks about that Peace that surpasses all understanding. Let us be a voice that calls in the desert of loneliness and despair. A voice that calls for those who are disenfranchised, a voice that says to the city, “Come, let us journey together. Come, let us be community. Come, let us receive the One that can bring us peace.”

By tomorrow, it is possible that we may not remember the names, Tiberius or Annas, but we will remember John the Baptist and Jesus for the rest of our lives. Because God’s Word came...and God cannot come to the world and leave the world unchanged. God cannot come to us and leave us unchanged.

May the God of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love lead us to look inward at the promise that comes with repentance. May God give us the courage to surrender, the courage to be a voice in the desert, a voice that others who are lost may follow to the God of Peace. Amen.