

Advent 2C 2021 Luke 1:68-79 & 3:1-6

After about a year of barely going anywhere, in the last couple months I have traveled just a bit, driving down to Washington, out to Ohio, and up in Minnesota. By comparison, we Pennsylvanians have to have a better understanding of what it would be like for Isaiah's prophecy, reflected in John the Baptist, to come to fruition. *Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low.* For Midwesterners and the speed bumps they call hills, that might not be a big deal. But here, where we sometimes give up on going over the mountains and just dig tunnels right through them, leveling the hills and valleys would be a monumental change. The region around the Jordan where John preached and baptized was nowhere near flat either; a steep, crooked, rough path connected John to Jerusalem, where God was understood to reside in the Temple. Yet here John, cries out: *prepare the way of the Lord.*

This was John's destiny from before he was even born. The psalmody for today, which comes a little earlier in Luke, is the song John's father Zechariah sings when he is born. Elizabeth and Zechariah were old and had no children when the angel Gabriel appeared to promise John's birth. Zechariah, who was a priest but who apparently forgot that this exact same thing happened to Abraham and Sarah, argues with Gabriel, who takes away his ability to speak for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy. When John is born, everyone expects him to be named Zechariah after his father, but Elizabeth insists that he be named John, as the angel had instructed. When Zechariah agrees, his power of speech returns and he sings of his son: *You, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way, to give God's people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.*

Fast forward two chapters and 30 years and we find John doing just what his father Zechariah and the angel Gabriel said that he would do: proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The details of John's story build the foundation for Luke's gospel. Luke names all the important people of the day: the Roman and Judean secular leaders and the high priests; he lists all the centers of political power. Then he says that it's to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness to whom the word of God came. This prepares us for Luke's perspective on the incarnation in two ways. First, Luke shows us that God's promises are fulfilled within our real human history, in the physical world in which we live. Luke's beatitudes don't bless the poor in spirit or those who hunger for righteousness but those who are literally poor and hungry. Luke gives us real world details because Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have—or should have—real impact on the world in which we live. Secondly, John's story shows that the good news is for all people, especially the least and lowest instead

of the high and mighty. None of the big important people in important places whom Luke named received God's word. Instead, God chose John, son of a random priest, in the wilderness—a nobody from nowhere.

But God does not just choose an unlikely messenger; God chooses unlikely people to receive the good news. It is not for those who are successful, powerful, or presume themselves to be righteous, but to *those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death*. For those whose lives would not have given them many opportunities to experience the goodness God intended, John promises that *all flesh shall see the salvation of God*. All flesh. That's everybody—which sort of seems impossible. Think about the hostility, danger, inequity, struggle, and grief of the world that we live in: people whose basic needs for food, safe drinking water, and adequate shelter aren't met; people without access to dignified, necessary, affordable healthcare; people fleeing violence; people wrongly incarcerated or those have been victimized but will never experience justice. How in the world do we go from all of that to *all flesh seeing the salvation of God*? As impossible to imagine as driving across Pennsylvania on a flat, straight highway, isn't it? And yet the way of the Lord for which we are to prepare is God's vision of peace, compassion, mercy, righteousness, forgiveness, freedom—all words we find right there in Zechariah's song, all characteristics of a human community where we strive to love, not harm one another.

John calls the people to a baptism of repentance, that is turning from human values—power, accumulation, competition, greed, vengeance—to God's way of service, charity, cooperation, generosity, mercy. That change of perspective is how we prepare for God to break into the mess that humanity has made of God's good creation. If we don't turn from idolizing the values of this broken world to see what God's way looks like, we'll miss seeing how God is coming to us. And if we miss seeing what God is up to, we'll miss getting to participate in the life and work of God's kingdom.

We do a lot of preparing at this time of year, but it's worth remembering that God's coming does not depend on us. God is not Santa, who won't come down the chimney unless we've set out cookies. God isn't waiting for us; we are to be waiting and watching for God who comes to us, bidden or unbidden. *All flesh shall see the salvation of God*. But it is easier to see when we're looking. May our eyes be opened in the shadows of this world so that when we see the dawn break, we know where we are called to reflect the light of Christ.