

December 9, 2018 • Second Sunday of Advent

“The Light of the Prophet” – SHINE LIGHT! Sermon Series

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 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. 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.’”

Over the course of this next year, we are going to be spending a good deal of time in this Gospel of Luke, one of the four early accounts of the story of Jesus and his message. I love this Gospel because Luke tells stories and he brings the astonishing message of God’s love for the world right down into flesh and blood lives and situations. Often when people who don’t know the Bible very well ask me what parts of it to read for starters, I suggest the Gospel of Luke.

Luke tells us about real people in the real world, and the difference Jesus will make for them all, for all of us. All the usual suspects are here—rich and poor, young and old, men and women, emperors and subjects, prophets and shepherds, saints and sinners. They’re all here in Luke’s cast of characters whose lives and whose world will be turned upside down and inside out by Jesus the Christ.

Today we hear part of Luke’s story of John the Baptist, a prophet, and the precursor of Jesus. In Luke’s story, it’s John’s job to set the stage, to tell the reader what’s about to happen and why. John gets everything ready, so that when Jesus is born and brings the world the message of his new kingdom, we’re ready to hear it.

The job of John the Baptist is to remind us that the birth of the Messiah is really about God inaugurating his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. And that’s why we have to listen very carefully to what John the Baptist is trying to say. He’s speaking God’s Word of a new realm of justice and peace into a time of tyranny and oppression.

At the time of Jesus and his cousin, John, God’s people were suffering at the hands of earthly rulers, the Roman government. At the same time, there was considerable infighting among the Jews—the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Zealots competed for power. You heard these tyrants called out by name, all seven of them quite specifically identified: “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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas....the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

John, the one whom Eastern Orthodox Christians regard as the last prophet of the First Covenant, enters quite abruptly onto the world stage as if he were the culmination of this historical moment. John, son of Zechariah, comes out of nowhere and in the midst of nowhere proclaims the Word of God. This is what prophets always do. They shine light in the darkness. They shine light into the darkness. Specifically, the darkness of oppression and tyranny and fear and hopelessness. The darkness of abuse. The darkness of everything that harms and hurts and squeezes life out of God’s children.

Luke makes it abundantly clear. On the one hand here, you’ve got an emperor, a governor, rulers and high priests. On the other hand you’ve got—who? A prophet. On the one hand you’ve got palaces and temples and bastions of power. On the other hand you’ve got—what? The wilderness.

And where does the Word of God show up? In the wilderness. And who hears the Word of God? The prophet.

Oddly enough, this apparently doesn’t surprise John one bit. Where did he gain such self-confidence, self-assurance? How does he know to trust this voice to be the Word of God? Well, whether you see him as the last in the line of the First Covenant prophets or as the first in the line of the New Testament prophets, it’s pretty clear that John understands who a prophet is and what a prophet does. A prophet shines light into all that would impede or obstruct the light of God’s justice and peace.

From deep in his own heart and mind, the prophet John recalls the words of his predecessor prophet Isaiah who had himself proclaimed the effect that the coming of God’s reign would bring—that in the royal palaces and temples and even in nature itself, everything, anything that had obstructed the light of God, the justice and peace of God, would be removed: every path made straight, every valley filled, every mountain and hill made low, the crooked ways made straight, the rough ways made smooth.

This is the salvation of God for this world. Those who suffer now will be made whole. Those who are oppressed and despised now will be set free. Those waiting in darkness will see light. Trust, people, that God is coming and will change the world. This is the source of our hope. In shining light, the prophet restores hope when hope seems lost.

St. Augustine once wrote this about hope: “Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.”

The prophet embodies all three—anger, courage and hope. All this, to prepare the way of the Lord. It is this work that we all share with the prophet—the work of preparing the way, in this world as we know it.

So--what in the world does that mean? How do WE prepare the way of the Lord?

We might look at different levels of preparation. The first, the social and global level, makes us perhaps the most uncomfortable, but Luke and the prophets make it clear that we can't avoid it. Luke is unabashedly political, isn't he? The Lord is coming, he says, into a world ruled by emperors and governors, this world, these rulers, this time, this place. And that world will be called to change—spiritually, economically, politically, and socially. God fills the valleys of our violence with peace. God brings down the mountains, replacing meanness with mercy.

So when we look around this world and we see things that just aren't right, when we see God's children suffering anywhere, righteous anger rises up within us and we find the courage to speak, to speak up, to speak out. Where do you see need for transforming and renewing change, for new beginnings?

The Gospel of Matthew puts it this way. Jesus, the Light of the World, speaking to his disciples, says: "YOU are the light of the world...No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they see your good works and give glory to God in heaven."

YOU are the light of the world—let that light shine into all the places of darkness preparing the Way of the Lord, trusting that God will strengthen and equip you.

On another level, this prophetic task to which we are called will also require some internal work on our part. This work of preparation must start in us, in our own hearts and in our relationships. To have any impact on the world, the valleys must first be lifted and the mountains brought low in the interpersonal worlds of our lives. In our closest relationships, our friendships, our marriages, our families, our workplaces, our social groups, we must lift the valleys of bitterness, competition. Lay low the mountains of resentment, prejudice and exclusivity, the rocky and rough places of the turmoil and tension of our daily life, the relationships twisted and crooked from jealousy and mistrust. We must work to make the highways that connect us one to another straight and smooth and safe. Free of hurt and violence of any kind, violence of word, deed and heart.

To prepare the way for the One who comes to us from the love in the heart of our God is to increase our love for one another, our respect for one another, our honoring of one another in all that we do and say, preparing the Way of the Lord within and between and among us.

That work begins, of course, at the very core of who we are. John calls us to prepare the way of the Lord in our own hearts, to make the royal highway straight and smooth that God may enter in and find us at the place of our deepest longing and need. In our prayers, we lift the valleys of our disappointment, doubt and fear. We bring down the mountains of our pride, our idols, our self-satisfaction. John calls us to repentance for the forgiveness of sins and this work we must do in our own heart of hearts, to make ready a place for the Lord's Messiah to come and make a home within us.

All this is the personal and challenging work each of us must do in Advent to prepare the way of the Lord and God's kingdom, for we're surely not going to convince anyone else of the truth of God's Messiah if our own lives do not witness to the life-saving power of the Holy One.

God's light shines into our world and into our hearts, to bring transformation and renewal, and to restore hope. More from the prophet Isaiah:

"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you...Lift up your eyes and look around...Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice."

May the light of God shine in our hearts, our minds, our lives, and in the prophetic hope we shine into this world. Prepare! Prepare the Way of the Lord!

Amen.

Notes:

This sermon quotes from:

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. In *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Willie James Jennings. In *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Vol. 1*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

William H. Lamar IV in "Living By the Word." *The Christian Century*. November 7, 2018.

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