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2 Advent; Year C
Luke 3:1-6

Preparing the Way

Advent would simply not be Advent without John the Baptist. Every year at this time, when we, along with the rest of the world, become positively possessed by the spirit of Christmas, here comes John the wild-eyed prophet – with honey in his beard and bugs on his breath – stark raving strange and raging, “Prepare the way of the Lord!” And every year we slump in our pews. Because we know that the preparation John has in mind has nothing whatsoever to do with shopping malls and mail-order catalogs, twinkling lights and jingling bells, wassail and fruitcake and company parties. These are Christmas images, and as such they are well and good. But John comes to remind us that, like it or not, Christmas is not here yet. This is Advent – and Advent is a desert time, a wilderness season. And John is its prophet, standing there at the margins of civilization, at the edge of the world, howling into the wind and jolting us back reality – “People of God! Stop, turn, face yourselves, and take stock! For he is coming soon!”

So much for “We Three Kings.” So much for “Silent Night.” The startling figure of John calls us to recognize that these first weeks of Advent look forward less to the little babe lying in a manger than to the Son of Man coming in glory. It is not a season of passive waiting, but of active preparation fueled by hopeful expectation for a future that is every bit as strange and surreal as old John himself, the waking dream of poets and prophets and madmen.

It is not surprising that the word of God comes to John in the wilderness. The wilderness is a time-honored spiritual symbol for the ideal meeting place between God

and humanity. In the wilderness, in the desert, in the dry and barren places of our lives we encounter ourselves as we truly are – vulnerable, naked, and weak. Alone and exposed, with no place to hide, we discover that our true selves – our broken, sinful, suffering selves – are the only ones God wants, because they are the only ones God can use.

John knew well the transforming power of the wilderness. He could easily have marched straight into Jerusalem, climbed the Temple mount, and proclaimed his message of repentance at the top of his lungs for all to hear. It would have been a dangerous move to be sure. But then danger never seemed to bother John very much. He literally lost his head, remember, for refusing to keep silent about King Herod's illegal marriage. But John didn't seek out the crowds in the nearby cities and towns. He wasn't interested in building a following. He was interested in building the kingdom. So he waited for those in the cities and towns to come to him, because he understood that the wilderness itself was part of the message, a reflection of the inner landscape of the heart, the transformation of which through repentance and forgiveness was the preparation that would clear the way for God's arrival in the person of Jesus, Israel's long overdue Messiah and King.

That is what the words from the prophet Isaiah are all about. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, 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" (Isa. 40:3-5). This glorious proclamation was originally addressed to the Israelites living in Babylon. They had been conquered, subdued, and forced into exile as a result of their disobedience to the divine

covenant. But God had not forgotten them. God would return, Isaiah declared, and lead God's people home. Then the glory of the Lord would be revealed, and all people would see it together. Israel would become what she was always meant to be – a light to enlighten the nations.

Now, much had changed between the time of the exile and the time of John. Or had it? The people had indeed returned to their homeland. But they had suffered a series of crippling conquests. The Greeks arrived first, followed by the Egyptians. Next were the Syrians, then the armies of Rome. They were living, as it were, under house arrest. They were exiles in their own land. What's more, the nations had not been enlightened. All flesh had not seen the salvation of God. Israel had turned in on herself. Obsessed with her own survival, she had forgotten her reason for being, her vocation to the world. And Isaiah's bold vision was left unfulfilled.

But things were about to change. Out there in that haunted, lonely place, with wind in his hair, dust in his eyes, and a fire in his gut, John had caught a glimpse of the world to come. God was about to do a new thing, and it would be nothing like what anyone expected. It would be an inner coup, a revolution of the heart that would slowly but surely lift the world heavenward, turn it over, and stand it squarely on its head. The valleys of despair and the mountains of oppression, the crooked paths of violence and the rough roads of injustice would be filled, leveled, straightened, and smoothed. The path would thus be cleared and God would come again to dwell among God's people. And all flesh would see the salvation of God. It would all begin out there, in the wilderness, with ordinary women and men who had the courage and humility to look in the mirror and

face the truth about themselves. It would be a revolution born of repentance, fed by forgiveness, and empowered by hope. It would be, in other words, an Advent revolution.

Of course, much has changed between John's time and our own. Or has it? In the person of Jesus God has come to dwell among God's people. But the mountains and valleys, the crooked paths and rough roads remain. The injustice, violence, oppression, and despair that inflict untold suffering on so many of God's precious children should be evidence enough that all flesh has not seen the salvation of God. And that is a problem – one Christians have struggled with from the first century onward. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has come to dwell among God's people. Everything is different now. And yet, so much remains the same. That is the paradox of the short season of Advent. We live in the meantime between times, between incarnation and consummation, between the already and the not yet.

It is at times a confusing and frustrating season in which to live. We have only to pick up the newspaper or turn on the television to realize that all is not well with the world, that the vision of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, of John, Jesus, and Paul – the poets, prophets, and madmen of God – remains woefully unfulfilled. Why are things such an unholy mess? When will God set things right? Where is God when we need God? Why does God delay? Isn't that what we really want to know? They are good questions, I'll grant you. They are hard questions. And it just may be that they are the wrong questions. Perhaps we should be asking instead: Why are things such an unholy mess? When will we set things right? Where are we when God needs us? Why do we delay?

You see, in John's vision, it is not God who prepares the way – it is us. We are the ones who are to fill the valleys and level the mountains, to straighten the paths and

smooth the roads so that God may come to dwell among God's people. Now I am not suggesting that Christ will not return until we have managed to create a picture perfect world. Somehow I just don't think that's going to happen. But it would not surprise me to discover, when all is said and done, that the delay of Christ's return was intended to provide us with the opportunity to become what we were always meant to be – the New Israel, a beacon of light, a herald of truth, a vessel of hope in a too often dark, disordered, and despairing world. It would not surprise me, in other words, to discover that the delay of Christ's return was intended to fashion us into an Advent people, a people whose ongoing preparation for the future entails an ongoing transformation of the present.

What does that look like? It looks like speaking words of kindness even when we are feeling anything but kind. It looks like offering forgiveness even when resentment is still simmering in our blood. It looks like being truly present with those in pain, even when our own pain is tearing us up inside. It looks like speaking the truth in love, even when we know we may suffer for it. It looks like clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, and welcoming the outcast even when our own inner nakedness, hunger, and alienation threaten to overwhelm us. It looks, in short, like entering the wilderness, where we lose ourselves and find ourselves in the One who is both now and yet to come, where we catch a glimpse of a new and very different world, where we, even we, become the poets, prophets, and madmen of God, thundering in the desert: "Prepare God's arrival! Fill the ditches, smooth the bumps, straighten the detours, pave over the ruts – so that everyone, everyone, may see the glorious parade of God's salvation."

AMEN.