

Malachi 3:1-4
Canticle 16
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

Advent 2C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Last year at the Easter Vigil, we baptized Tess. Tess was 5 when she was baptized and she was very, very excited. It was hard for her to wait. It was hard to be in the story space in the great hall and to play her part in the Easter Vigil stories we always tell before we begin the first Eucharist of Easter. It was even hard to stand around the enormous crackling new fire to say our prayers, and Tess loves to say prayers. But she couldn't wait. "Everything is going to be different when I'm baptized," she told her mama. And after she was baptized, it was true – not just for her but for her whole family. Tess waited a long time to be baptized and by the time she was ready, she could hardly contain herself.

What does a 5 year-old know that we are missing? How did Tess know everything would be different? These are the mysteries of God, alive in the life of a 5 year-old little girl. We don't know how she knew. She just knew. I often say that children are much closer to God than grown-ups are. No wonder Jesus says we need to be more like them.

The people who made their way out of the cities and country sides and into the wilderness, down to the messy, muddy river Jordan must have had an inkling that things would be different after they were baptized too. They were lined up as far as the eye could see. Just like Tess, those folks waited a very long time to be baptized, to be washed clean, to be called to get ready, to repent, to turn around, because turning around really is what repentance really means. Those folks must have known something would be different, otherwise why would they have come out to that seemingly God-forsaken wilderness?

And for that matter, why was John out there? John came from Jerusalem, the home of the temple, the dwelling place of all the authority and wisdom and power of the religious institution. Certainly if people wanted religion, if people wanted wisdom, if people wanted to hear the voice of God, they would have gone to the temple! The temple was the heart of the city, the high priests Annas and Caiaphas were there... surely they were the ones with the answers.

But the people who lined up for as far as the eye could see weren't after that same old brand of religion. The people who were lined up were lined up, waiting a very long time, hardly able to contain themselves, because they wanted a fresh start and they thought they had found it in a wild man with the voice that cried out in the wilderness, a prophetic voice calling out a truth so real that it couldn't be denied. Repent. Get ready. God is coming. GOD is coming.

Luke is probably the gospel writer most interested in history. You can tell, because he often places us in history by telling us who the important people of the day are. Listen and see if you can't tell what he was doing: 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.

Luke is placing us in history. He's telling us who is allegedly in charge. Luke is very clear about who the allegedly "important people" are – they're the ones who appear to have all the power. Pontius Pilate worked for Herod. And Pilate is the one who would ultimately acquiesce to the raging crowds and send Jesus to his crucifixion. Herod was the one who was so afraid of the power of that little baby Jesus that he ordered the slaughter of all the boy babies in and around Bethlehem about the time that Jesus was born. And the high priest Caiaphas? His part in Jesus' trial and execution made him seem pretty powerful too. Luke calls out no less than 7 very important people to help locate us in the history he is writing of. But the funny thing is, the Word of the living God didn't come to any of those allegedly important people. The Word of God came to John, the son of a low-level local priest, a wild man who had taken to the wilderness. Stunning, isn't it? And exactly the way God operates. Think about it. God chose an unknown and unimportant young teenaged girl to be the God bearer. God chose the shepherds, the least of the least and lowest of the lowest to be the first ones to see the baby Jesus. And God chose a locust and honey eating wild man dressed in smelly camel skins to be the one to prepare us for Jesus, God's promise. Amazing.

John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and that baptism really was a brand new beginning. I think we need to be careful here, though. Maybe this is even a good place to return to Tess's wisdom. Tess knew that everything was going to be different after she was baptized. Was her little 5 year-old self concentrating on repenting of her sins? Was she working hard to correct all the things she could possibly have done that might have been displeasing to God? No, of course she wasn't. Tess knew that everything was going to be different after she was baptized. But that was because of what God was doing in her, not what she was doing to please or displease God.

That word repentance is so important. Yes, turning around, making a fresh start is what repentance means, and yes, we need to consent to God acting in our lives so that we can allow ourselves to be changed. But that is very different from thinking that in our repenting, in our turning around and going a different way, we are somehow correcting ourselves enough to be worthy of being welcomed into God's family and offered the opportunity to die to the ways of an uncaring world and to rise to the new life of God's love. We don't have to make it a grueling effort. We simply need to allow God to work in us. Because God working in us is the only way we can ever truly turn around, ever truly experience a new beginning, ever know with every cell of our being that everything is going to be different.

These words from Luke and from the prophet Isaiah are so important for us to hear in Advent as we watch and wait and ready ourselves for the coming of the Christ child. There are so many ways to prepare, and hopefully we've been doing that by making space for quiet, by noticing the many ways God is present, by recognizing the sacredness of all things, by searching our own hearts, by engaging in our own personal rites for Advent. These individual acts are all very important AND we must not forget that it is God's action for all of God's people that we ought to be focused on. Hear again the words Luke quotes from the Prophet Isaiah:

"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."

All flesh... every single one shall see the salvation of God. As it turns out, preparing the way of the Lord is not just work we do in and for ourselves. That is important and good work, but it is only one part. The prophet tells us that the way to prepare is to fill in the valleys, make the mountains low, turn crooked paths straight, make rough roads smooth, because when we do that, ALL people will see the salvation of God. In Isaiah's day, this was literally what happened, you know. Engineer-ish soldiers went ahead of the Emperor's traveling party to fill in valleys, to level mountains, to make crooked paths straight. To prepare the way was to remove all the obstacles that might have made it difficult for the royal traveling party to get to where it was going.

Knowing this, preparing the way of the Lord takes on new meaning. Not only are we to prepare our own individual hearts, but we are also to be about the business of making the path clear and easy for others so that all people will indeed be able to see the salvation of our God. Not only do we look for the obstacles that keep us from coming closer to God, we look for ways that we can be obstacles for others in their desire to come closer to God. Repentance means nothing if not turning toward God and away from those things not of God, if not making it easier for people to see the salvation of God when they see us. If the people around us decided whether or not to come to church, whether that be St Barnabas or any other church, if they decided whether Christianity was worth being curious about, if Jesus was made known to them in the way his followers lived their lives, would those lives – *which are our lives* - draw them in? Would our words, our actions, our politics, our investments, would the thoughts of our hearts draw people toward God, or would they send them away?

Isaiah's words help us to see that preparing our hearts is for the purpose of repenting, of turning toward God so that we can live our lives in ways that make it easy for all people to see God. That's the job of a prophet, you know. A prophet isn't so much one who predicts the future... a prophet is one who makes God's presence known. Like Tess.

Who are the prophets God has sent to you to help you prepare the way of the Lord? When have you been the voice of one crying out in the wilderness "Prepare the way of the Lord?" Opening ourselves to hear the prophetic voices around us and living our lives in ways that invite all people see and know the salvation of the God whose name is love, is John the baptizer's message. It's Isaiah's message and Tess's message too. Advent invites us all to be hearers and proclaimers and examples of the goodness of God.

So then, how will YOU prepare the way of the Lord? Amen.