

Last Sunday, as we began Advent, we spoke of it as a path that reveals over time our deep longing - all the “unfulfilled” things of our lives that leave us in longing. Touching those things we touched the real “waiting” Advent holds for us and where it is that this waiting finally leads.

But waiting is not the only thing Advent invites of us.

John the Baptist is a major figure in the Gospel of Luke. Alongside that of Jesus, John gets his own birth narrative. It's the beginning of this narrative that opens the gospel and it is surprisingly similar to the story surrounding Jesus' birth: Unlikely parents, the foretelling of a very special child by Gabriel, a miraculous conception, and prophecy at their Temple “presentations.”

The defining feature of John in Luke though (that which warrants his own birth story) is that he is to “go before the Lord to prepare his way.” John is an important figure in Luke, but that importance rests in his purpose - “preparing the way” for the one who is coming. That Luke devotes so much of his account to this otherwise “supporting role” points beyond the figure of John to his purpose, emphasizing his role as preparer of the way. In other words Luke sees the work of preparation for the coming of Jesus as absolutely critical.

In the context of Advent, it seems it's not only anticipation, but preparation.

The words from John's father Zechariah as he prophesied over his newborn son define John's identity and presence in the gospel:

You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.

The message of preparation John is to bring is centered on the knowledge of God's salvation... by the forgiveness of sins. That knowledge (that God intends to save you and this is how God will do it) is the preparation for which baby John is intended.

So today, I want to bisect John's "preparing" message. Luke is very intentional about the way he presents John, John's message and its language of "prepare." It seems that Luke believes that preparation must be focused in two directions, because there are two locations that need preparing. These locations are different but very connected.

In our Gospel reading today we meet John as a man. The word of God has come to him, so he begins “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” - fulfilling his father’s prophecy. Luke uses language from the prophet Isaiah to describe the preparation of which John speaks:

Every valley shall be [lifted] up,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth

What’s clear from these words at the outset is that the preparation of “the way” is not accomplished by us. John is not saying “lift every valley, make low every mountain, straighten the crooked path, and smooth out the rough places.” No, these are **words of promise** - these are things that will happen - and John is preparing people for it.

I read these words, and I imagine the way it all looks. But I’m soon reminded that the Forgiveness at the center of John’s “prepare” message makes it Forgiveness that Isaiah is describing here. Forgiveness is the way of the Lord: This is what needs doing. It’s the lack of this that keeps us unprepared - unprepared for the obstacles to be removed, the path to be shortened, and the coming of the Lord imminent.

As Christians we hear a lot about forgiveness - that this is what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross, dying for our sins. Our forgiveness is from God in Christ, and **to believe that is to receive it**. But that “line of thought” doesn’t say enough about the obstacles we have that keep that forgiveness un-believable, and thus un-receivable. **Shame** stands in the way of this great gift. What we’ve done and left undone in life makes deep valleys and high mountains for that gift to travel. That road God travels to us is made crooked, winding, and rough by our shame. But we now hear “the voice of one crying in the wilderness... Prepare the way of the Lord.”

Our first location: This preparation is an internal conversion - “Receive this forgiveness. Let it work on you, let it open you to the coming fulfillment of God’s promises to you - ‘Beloved child, made in my image, be forgiven.’” That these words are hard to receive give us a peak at how truly unprepared we are for the gift that is coming. These words reveal to us, over the terrain they must travel, the landscape of our lives and how profoundly it is that we need a savior.

The second way of seeing the John's message (the preparedness Luke is emphasizing) is quite unmistakable. We'll hear it in no uncertain terms next week, but hear it again | now in our reading's opening words:

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.

I get an email from an organization called The Spirituality of Conflict every week. It's a reflection on the coming Sunday's gospel text through the lens of conflict. The writer is an Irish poet, theologian and conflict mediator named Pádraig Ó Tuama. His perspective is rooted in "The Troubles" of his home country - the 30 year conflict between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In this week's issue, I read a brief history of each of these political/religious leaders mentioned in our reading. It's interesting, the corrupt, violent, and oppressive history found among these 7 powerful men.

Why would Luke introduce John's ministry with this run down on the "powerful" in his time and place? Do you hear it as I did? That "the word of God came not to a single one of these, but to John"? The point is emphasized in the geography too: The word of God came not to Rome, the seat of imperial power, or even to Jerusalem, the religious capital of a backwater province of the Empire - the word of God came to John in the wilderness.

"Luke's gospel is an extraordinarily political one..." Pádraig writes. This gospel, more than any other (or at least more overt than any other) is keenly focused on power and the plight of people living and dying under it. Jesus in this gospel takes a much more politically controversial tone and texture in his direct interactions with people and these powers. This will be something to keep our eye on as we move through this year's Lukan lectionary cycle together.

But turning back to those same images Luke takes from Isaiah, do you hear them a little differently in this light?

Every valley shall be [lifted] up,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth

Considering “real world application” these images sound unsettling at least, right? But for those under the knee of corrupt and brutal political powers, might it sound hopeful? Luke may still be pointing to forgiveness here, but not at the expense of ignoring the systems of power, oppression and inequity that define the existence of his community. The oppressive political powers of his time and place (and ours) also make deep valleys and high mountains, winding the road of God on rough terrain. And with an incisive understanding of people’s lives (in that and this society), it’s from there that John calls to us - “Prepare the way of the Lord.”

Here again, these words reveal a way that this preparation is not accomplished by us, but they do point to the trajectory of God’s work in an unjust world. “Be prepared,” they seem to say. But this preparedness does not leave out the word about forgiveness we started with. Indeed, this preparedness not only includes that word, but relies upon it.

Remember with me: John went around “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...” Here *repentance* comes into focus as Luke uses these names (and the systems of domination they represent) to introduce John. As you know, *repentance* means literally to simply “turn around.” Whether it’s a perspective you’ve lived with forever, habitual patterns of daily life, or the ways we are conformed to this society in which we live - that “turning around” can be incredibly hard. This is true even when you see the need to do it. But it’s especially true when you’re defensively dug into your own anger.

Yes, anger. Anger is an amazingly adaptive emotion and it serves many purposes in our emotional functioning. It's among the easiest of emotions to reach for under stress, making it useful when we feel the need for protection/safety. An emotional multitude typically exists behind anger when we encounter it. But what anger is usually masking, defending from view, is shame.

"Prepare the way of the Lord," John proclaims. "God is coming - go a different way: Repent." In my experience, repentance depends on my knowledge of God's forgiveness. What finally allows me to repent, to turn around, is remembering my forgiveness - that my desperate need to turn around doesn't keep God from forgiving me. This doesn't necessarily put out the fire of my anger, but it turns down the flames just enough to help me see what's actually burning. More often than not, it's not what I thought it was: Nine times out of ten, it's shame.

Shame for the way I conform so eagerly to the ease and consumerism of this culture that results in human deprivation and the destruction of the earth. Shame for the benefits afforded me for the color of my skin, my gender, sexuality and relative youth - not to mention my deep-seated prejudice that makes me think I merit these benefits. Shame for the ease with which I look away from all of this... Shame for the way I lean into God's love at the expense of God's justice, to which God demands my participation.



By the grace of God, John's baptism of repentance (remembrance of my forgiveness) helps me to put shame down. John's baptism of repentance helps me to look up from it, unhindered, and observe the structures of the world to which I am molded, under which the world is suffering and breaking. John's baptism of repentance prepares me for the new life into which Jesus calls and baptises me, just as he does you.

This new life was described by Pádraig in his email this week when he used the word "Incarnation." He said this, "The gospel text calls us to be incarnate in our social, cultural, linguistic and political realities and to search for the pathway of justice in these realities." ... The incarnation of God in Christ is that for which John prepares the way | but the incarnation of God's forgiveness is where our preparation begins. The incarnation of that forgiveness, the release from shame, turns us from the "priority of our souls" that we might prepare the way of the Lord in the work of reshaping the unjust realities of this world. For our salvation was never for us alone, but for the world God so loves.

The word of God came to John in the wilderness. The word of forgiveness comes to you. John's proclamation is made yours: By the grace of God incarnate your forgiveness, release your shame, and prepare the way.

(For you, beloved child, are called the prophet of the Most High; You go before the Lord to prepare her ways, to give knowledge of salvation to all people by the forgiveness of sins. [In our wait,] this is the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high breaking upon us, giving light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, guiding our feet into the way of peace.)

AMEN