

“Setting the Table for Jesus”
The 2nd Sunday of Advent - December 5, 2021 - Luke 3.1-6/C
Sermon for Day1 - The Rev. Susan Langhauser

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.’”* (Luke 3:1-6)

Grace and peace to you from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I was in college, I studied lighting design for the stage. The Holy Grail of lighting is to find a way to achieve a “perfect” blackout - literally the absence of any kind of light illuminating or reflecting in a given space, preferably on stage. Now, you might think a perfect blackout just requires turning off the lights, but, no... there are Exit lights and cracks under doors and even through walls, add in skylights and worklights, the unplanned and unpredictable lights of cell phones and the tiny little lights attached to the rows of seats on the aisles. Any one of them can totally ruin the darkness, which I learned while attempting a blackout in our workshop space, *The Black Box*. I failed. So, my professor told me to go and stand at center stage. Then, one by one, he extinguished each source of light. At each level of the darkening, my eyes adjusted naturally, and I began to despair that I might ever experience my goal. Then suddenly, there it was. Black. Pitchblack. No-light-coming-from-anywhere perfect blackness that was completely disorienting and even a bit frightening. Then, from the back of the theatre, he lit a match.

A single flame in a lightless room is like a floodlight, completely dismissing the darkness. Which is good to remember, as the world around us seems to get darker each day as we deal with life in a global pandemic, human violence, natural disasters, and political and economic instability. Our previous, *help your neighbor* attitude seems to have turned into *everyone for themselves*, as the addiction to individual rights wins over care for our neighbor, and fear erases peace on earth, good will to all. Even Nature seems to be conspiring against us: dark in the morning as we awake; dark in the evening even before we sit down to dinner. Before too long it might become difficult to hope, even in Advent’s beautiful blue Season of Hope.

I can’t read the gospel for the 2nd Sunday of Advent without being drawn to the clarion call, *“Prepare the Way of the Lord!”* I serve a church named Advent, so the **Season** of Advent is always special, as we light each week’s candle and get ready for the coming of Christ. As an Advent bonus, before you really get to see Jesus in the readings, you get to know and love John the Baptist. I mean, while Jesus was a model of the godly life, John could never have gotten into a banquet in his regular attire, nor would he ever be invited to bring his signature dish of locusts and honey to any neighborhood gathering. And yet, God’s word had **come to him** - in the wilderness - where he was and how he was. A fire was beginning to glow in him to *Prepare the Way of the Lord*.

Let's imagine a young John, in the synagogue with his father, Zechariah. I can see him sitting there in worship, not unlike others who are "encouraged" by their parents to be there. He is **not** paying attention - until the large hand of his father bears down on his shoulder - and he is told that today **he** will read the scripture. I imagine he is handed the scroll of Isaiah, which he unrolls and reads, from the prophet's 40th chapter, "*The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord...*" John sits down, but somehow, his life feels like it is starting to shift. The light is being kindled inside of him. But before the spark and flame, there is much to be done. Much for which to prepare.

In Luke's gospel, John was already in the wilderness - a place folks go to meet God - when the word of God came to him. Known as "the Baptizer" elsewhere, here he is simply a preacher proclaiming repentance for the forgiveness of sins, performing ritual cleansings akin to the Jewish purification rites. God called John to preach repentance as the most appropriate work for the people - their preparation for the coming of the King.

My mother taught school for 35 years, but she also made her mark in our little town as a Brownie leader *par excellence*. Every year she would pack up our huge family picnic basket with china and crystal, silver and linens, real dinner candles and candlesticks for her "Grand Table-Setting Lesson." (It was important to her that all her little Brownies would know how to set a proper table - in her mind the hallmark of good taste and breeding.)

I experienced the "Grand Table-Setting Lesson" at a minimum, six times. As an adult, I have always used cloth napkins and set a fairly formal table, much to the chagrin of my teenage son who always wanted to know why we had to make all this fuss. "Well, you never know when the Queen might drop in," I'd reply. Now that his 5-year-old is also at the table, he understands, and there are smiles all around when his boy snuffs the candles at the end of the meal. Soon, his son will be old enough to light the candles which start our meals.

Preparing the way for the Lord included many things: Paths that needed straightening. Valleys that needed filling in. Mountains and hills that had to be leveled, crooked things relaxed, and rough things lovingly smoothed as a carpenter would smooth wood with sandpaper. All the obstacles needed to be removed so that they would not hinder the coming of the Lord. And good news! Our contribution to the preparations - our only task is simply to repent - to turn around, change our ways, and be cleansed. We are to be made holy (literally "set apart") so as to be able to come into the presence of God. For it is in the presence of God where our story and God's Story connect.

John had an important place in that story. For it was *John's* prophetic words that were preparing The Way for Jesus, while *God* was setting the table, getting everything ready to reveal things in a new light to others, who were also being prepared. Even the Archangel Gabriel was busy visiting in-person with Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary.

But meanwhile, others were making paths more crooked, valleys much deeper, mountains higher than ever -- everything they could to render The Way more **difficult**. Rome had declared it was time for a census. Herod was trying to be as Great as Caesar so he might achieve the title of king. Darkness was descending at the hands of those who blocked the way of liberation, justice, peace and compassion - those whose names are recorded in scripture and history as early as the year 29: Tiberius, Pilate, the Herods, Annas and Caiaphas. Night was closing in on the Chosen Ones of Israel. The darkness must have seemed suffocating, but very soon the time would be fulfilled when "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*" (John 1:5)

Just as the Jews of Jesus' time knew, we know that we are not alone in the dark. Our table is set and a match has been struck to light the 2nd candle of the Advent wreath, which changes everything. Even shadows take on a new beauty when caught by this light - as it is making a way in the wilderness, straightening the crooked and smoothing out the rough places - turning the road toward Bethlehem.

The Light will come. How might we prepare to *lean into* that Light? Can we ready ourselves to trust it enough that we might we live in our darkness *as if* we were strolling in familiar territory with a good companion? Can we embrace it *as if* we were going through the difficult valleys of our lives without being afraid of them? Can we anticipate God in our story *as if* over and over again a grace-filled word will come to find us right where we already are?

God - who really doesn't *need* us to prepare anything - will come to us - regardless of our efforts - at a time we might least expect. Even when we are in the dark, in the way or in the wilderness, God comes: a whisper in our hearts; a dream in our heads; an action out of character; a baby sleeping in a feeding trough. These are miracles for which we try to prepare, ones that bring us the hope of Advent. New strength. New faith. New light.

The poet Theodore Roethke wrote in his journal, "*deep in their roots, all flowers keep the light.*" I believe that deep in our hearts, all of us keep the Christ who was, who is, and who is to come, the Light of the World. However you need to prepare for God's coming, you can still rest in the fact that the highway home is straight and clear. Because this season, like all seasons of human existence, begins and ends in God. The table is set, and the Light will come. And the darkness will not overcome it. Amen.

Prayer: Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way for your only Son. May we always live lives that invite and encourage others to take their seat at your table, and be nourished and fed by your word and your very life. Give us the courage to enlighten the world with your own glorious light. We pray in your name. Amen.