

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."

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

I want to start out this morning being completely honest with you. Those city names in the Gospel, where Herod's brother, Phillip ruled? I have absolutely no idea if I pronounced the correctly or not. Almost every week, someone who is doing a reading will ask me "How do I pronounce this 14 letter name that only has two vowels?" I usually tell them in return what one of my Liturgics professors told our class in seminary, "Give it your best shot, but say it with authority and no one will question it!"

But the city names are hardly the primary point in this Gospel offered for the second Sunday in Advent. We hear the words of John the Baptist this week, who we hear is "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" and he is doing this by offering the words of Isaiah found in Scripture.

Let's keep in mind that John the Baptist was hardly presenting himself like the priests in the temple. In Matthew, he is described saying "John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey". No exactly dressed in

the finery of the priestly class of the church of the time! I am aware of churches today where, if someone came in dressed like this, they may not be so well received! And yet Matthew goes on to offer, “Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” He delivered the message in a way people could hear it, but it still sounds like an approach that suggests more affordable vestments for a priest!

But how he was dressed is not the important part either. I found I was very struck by the line from Isaiah offered “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.” That small phrase says so much, and I am willing to bet we have all stood in that position. A maybe somewhat lonely or lost feeling of thinking you know the truth, but your voice is no more heard than if you were calling out in the wilderness – your voice and your truth being lost in the trees.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized how often people feel that way, alone, unheard, and offering the truth, perhaps even a Gospel truth. I thought of Rosa Parks sitting alone on that bus in Montgomery. Part of her truth was that she was tired, but she cried out in the wilderness with her actions.

I thought of Martin Luther King Junior. He stood up and cried out in that seeming wilderness of segregation, and paid the price for his crying out.

I thought of Nelson Mandela. He spent 27 years in prison for using his voice to address a system that was inherently wrong, not just for him, but for everyone around him.

I thought of that group of teenagers in Florida – the ones who survived the mass shooting in Parkland. They spoke their truth, in the midst of further death threats spoken against them and negative press, but they held onto their truth after seeing their friends die.

I thought of Mother Theresa – she knew the poverty in that area of India, and she chose to address it. Her crying out still echoes today.

And, of course I thought of Jesus, who paid the ultimate price for his voice, and I thought of John the Baptist, who was sharing a scripture that everyone in his culture knew, but maybe didn’t believe.

Take a moment and think of someone you knew, or knew of, who spoke their truth even if they seemed alone – even if their voice shook when they spoke. This is sometimes scary business – especially if you feel you are standing alone.

And I realized as I thought that the one thing all of these people has in common was that feeling alone in the wilderness, unsure if anyone could hear their cry except the trees. Maybe not doubt, or maybe doubt, maybe more a type of loneliness. Even Jesus who in Matthew observes to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?”

What do these voices crying out seek? '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.' They all seek that the world we know, or think we know, will be no more, because there is a truth that will go beyond what we see. Yes, by these words, the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth and in the end all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Not a bad dream, even if you have to cry it alone in the wilderness for a while.

Maybe My examples are too large. Mandela, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, but the examples go on from there. To be that voice crying in the wilderness does not mean you have to be larger than life. We can all do this act in so many little ways. We can choose to not follow what the advertisers say we should do, we can choose to not follow what our society norms suggest, heck, we can even reject cultural norms and choose a Gospel norm instead. We can follow the Lord that is present in our own lives. A Lord that we have a relationship with, a Lord who sometimes needs us to cry out in the wilderness of the world – even if at the times we feel we are alone.

It can be hard to stand alone and cry out – but all the people we've talked about had the strength of their faith and the strength of their convictions – all of the back up by the grace of God, too.

As is offered in today's reading from Baruch, "For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God. The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God's command. For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.

Not a bad spot to be in – shaded by the fragrant trees and led in Joy in the light of God's glory – even if you are in a place with a name no one can pronounce

We are all asked to be that one crying in the wilderness. I don't believe we can plan when to cry out, but we can open our hearts and make ourselves available. Maybe we will know – maybe we have been feeling it build for a while. And maybe, if we cry out, we will find that we are not alone.

Amen