

Luke 3:1–6

New Revised Standard Version

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.'"

God brings joy in the darkness not in spite of the darkness but in and through it. That for me is one of the truths of this season of waiting for Christ's coming. This week I was feeling down about a situation and I realized that I was grieving. I was grieving what happened and when I was able to put that name to it, that I was grieving, I felt such peace from God. I thought of that amazing line from the television show, *Wandavision*. In that show the two main characters, Wanda and Vision, are remembering all of the losses they have endured and Vision says, "what is grief, if not love persevering?" To lose someone does not erase the love we have felt for them, but in and through our sadness, God brings us joy and peace.

We are in the season of Advent. This is the time of waiting for the coming of Christ, but also a time when we see hope when all evidence tells us not to hope. Mary carries a child on faith it will change her world. The Magi leave home to become pilgrims. Shepherds overcome fear and follow.¹ It seems that true hope is best lived out when our feet get to moving and we act.

Today we light the candle of peace, but we hear the words of John the Baptist calling us to repent. John the Baptist is a lot. He is always yelling repent wearing his camel hair clothes and eating locusts and honey. I hear the word repent and I think of a street preacher with a megaphone who thinks that fear is a way to bring people closer to God. I always wonder if street preachers notice people crossing to the other side of the street to avoid them?

The word we translate as repent in the Greek is the word *metanoia*. It is the prefix meaning "after" combined with the word "mind". So we can define repent as an afterthought or a second thought, when we change our mind after we have thought about it. Repentance is like a do-over. What would you do-over if you could? Maybe you want to do Christmas differently this year, with less consumerism and less greed. What do we want to turn away from and say no more of this? Advent is an opportunity for us to have that call for action and accountability and then to make that change.

You might have noticed when I read our scripture passage for today, that there were some super hard names that I stumbled over. They are unusual names, but they are key to what is going on in these opening verses to John the Baptist's ministry.² There is this extraordinary contrast of the location of John's ministry and to whom the Word of God comes. It comes to John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, in the wilderness in contrast to these super important people like the Emperor and Pontius Pilate. John the Baptist goes to the people inviting them to a new beginning. Then we have a quotation from Isaiah 40, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah. "Prepare the way of the Lord," how are we supposed to hear those words without thinking of Godspell (prepare ye the way of the Lord)?

¹ Thanks to Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis of Middle Church in New York City for her words: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxIvDjjphd4>

² Thanks to Sermon Brainwave from Working Preacher: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIUX4i6vYfQ&t=967s>

Isaiah 40 is one of my favorite chapters in scripture. It begins with these words, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” It is a word of comfort in the middle of exile for the Jewish people. Yes, life is hard now and you’re in the midst of struggle but God is with you. God did not abandon you, God has never left you. It is a reminder that the high places will be brought down, low places will be brought up, crooked places will be made straight. A reminder that what is broken and causing anguish is going to be fixed or repaired and will bring peace.

Our reading from Luke’s Gospel ends with the words, “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” All flesh shall see the salvation of God, I wonder what do they see? What does the salvation of God look like? What are the glimpses of God’s presence with us right now? When we worship God together, I see God’s presence when we sing together. I saw God’s presence Monday when I went with Greg Basile to visit Beth’s mom Wanda in the hospital as we prayed together. I saw God’s presence in the wind as I visited with a member of the church about what was going on in their life. I saw God’s presence Wednesday night at Choir practice as we sang together and laughed together. Choir practice is so much fun!

I think of a few weeks ago when our youth went to see another youth, Wes Peters, because he was in the musical Oklahoma! Our youth were cheering him on to remind him that God is cheering him on. God is cheering all of us on because God loves us and God is with us. God is with us in every hospital room, at every graveside, in every dark room after everyone else has gone home to their normal lives. God is with every refugee who is turned away at the last door and every gay kid being sent away to conversion therapy convinced that God hates them. God is with every immigrant kid trapped in a detention center and every sex worker and every addict and every victim of abuse at the hands of religious leaders. God is with every foster kid with a garbage bag full of their treasures and every protestor crying out in the streets that Black lives matter. God is with every murdered transgender person and every person experiencing homelessness and every unheard and uncelebrated and ignored image of God. God is with the mourning, with the scared, with the angry, with those who hold this knowledge that God’s presence is with us in our thin and weary places.³ God is with us and God is saying to us keep showing up and I will make a way.

My question for you is how is God renewing your strength today? How is God bringing you peace? It might feel like you are in the wilderness right now. Remember that the wilderness is a time of preparation and formation. How are you being formed and shaped to see the salvation of God? John the Baptist’s call to repentance doesn’t have to be scary. It can be an invitation that feels like possibility, that feels like a new beginning. It can be an opportunity to change our mind and have a do-over.

This week I met with someone who wanted to plan their funeral. They aren’t sick, but it brought them great peace of mind to know that their wishes had been shared and their family wouldn’t be scrambling after their death. We talked about songs that they liked and scripture passages. They talked about the end of Isaiah 40, “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary; God’s understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” Thanks be to God, Amen.

³ Thanks to writer Sarah Bessey for this litany: <https://twitter.com/SarahBessey/status/1465888349235728387>