

PREPARING THE WAY

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The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
Burlington, Vermont

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, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as 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.’ ⁵Every 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; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’

This morning, I would like to reflect with you on the different faces of Advent. When I think of Advent, I sometimes think of slowing down. Advent is a time to be attentive to what is around us. The other night, so many of us gathered in the chapel to participate in a prayerful and beautifully crafted liturgy shaped by our high school youth. Thanks to Dan Morgan and so many other youth who did such a nice job. While the world spins around us, as we scramble to get all of our school work done before the break, and as navigate through superficial social events, it was a real pleasure to sing, read scripture, and share communion together amidst the glow of candlelight. What a wonderful mix of people of all ages who gathered to prepare for the arrival of the Christ child. During this season we live our lives where we feel like we are running out of time. We are so busy trying to cram it all in to get ready that by the time we arrive at Christmas morning we collapse. Prayer, candlelight, silence, and gentle forms of community speak to our souls and introduce a different reality to get us off the Christmas treadmill. Very well done.

For some Advent needs to be about slowing down. But I have discovered that for others Advent, has more meaning when they can speed up. Some of us spend too many of our days in a lonely slumber. What I loved about Thursday night was its sense of balance. After this very contemplative service, we all went upstairs to share a joyous meal together which had a different sort of feel to it but was also pregnant with meaning. Silence for some is not so restorative and can only make our hearts ache as we remember family or friends who are no longer with us. Perhaps the meal especially spoke to those who have a little too much silence in their lives. We may long for companionship and a good deal of cheer. A little playfulness and a warm meal helps us to forget our grief and loneliness for a while. For some, preparing for the coming of Christ involves cheeriness,

fellowship, and good food because such things eases our loneliness and pierces our darkness. Eating and laughing together offers a hopeful foretaste of good things to come.

But let me say that there is another dimension to Advent preparation that feels a little grittier but holds out its own promise of restoration and renewal. The arrival of John the Baptist, who was a wild man, certainly mixed everything up. This man, wearing his long hair with dread locks, and eating locusts and honey, boldly entered an oppressive political and religious environment, proclaiming a baptism for the repentance of sins. John was crying out in the political, economic, and religious wilderness of the ancient world to prepare the way of the lord. John had a vision where the darkest valleys of political intrigue would be filled. He helped us imagine how every mountain and hill that may seem so insurmountable will be made low. John envisioned a world where the crooked parts that don't line up very well, will get straightened out, and the unnecessary and often cruel political roughness will be made smooth. John offered a vision of a better world where all kinds of people would be saved from the bondage they were living in. John challenges us to turn our life over to God to counter forces in the world that are more death dealing than life giving.

During this Advent time, we are preparing the way for people who have traveled so far from lands torn by war or economic strife to this country where they have found opportunity and safe refuge. And yet some have left one wilderness and have discovered another sort of wilderness here in America. It is an adjustment to adapt to this culture, new food, new customs, new language and new economic and social stresses. It has always been a challenge. In my old church in Waukegan started by German immigrants it was such a struggle to fit in with a different language. Many experienced discrimination. I noted with interest the story of the American flag in our sanctuary which was important to immigrants who were eager to show that they were American in the face of those who questioned their right to be here and their patriotism.

In our own time, there are also challenges. For some there is a longing to be united with loved ones. And while many have found here that the rough places have been made plane, they still worry about loved ones who live in peril. Many dream of family coming to be with them for Christmas. In many ways, John cleared a way in the wilderness and offered a new lease on our lives. But the harsh political realities of navigating a complex immigration system weigh heavy on the hearts and minds of millions. The political back drop is of anti immigrant rhetoric which has been shamelessly used as a form of short-term political gain for some on the right. And in other cases, fears of immigrants driving down wages have lead some labor activists on the Democratic left to oppose reform. The political stalemate between two parties have left so many immigrant families stuck holding the bag. For some children in our country their Christmas present this year is a lump of coal because Dad is getting deported.

So this Advent, as we prepare for Christmas, maybe we need more repentance and less political posturing. What we need is to start looking for are John the Baptists in our midst to clear away some wilderness we may be living in and make the paths straight. As an Advent people, John invites us to look for signs that people, baptized in love, are showing some courage to something that brings life to all people.

In this season of watching and waiting I look for signs of promised justice. For instance, I noted with interest that there is a coalition of 250 conservatives who came to Washington last Tuesday to encourage Republicans in Congress to join a growing consensus for comprehensive immigration reform. These are preachers, prosecutors, and employers including the Bush family, Republicans in Florida and the US Chamber of Commerce who argue that the GOP should embrace rather than vilify recent immigrants as they seek to improve their lives in our country. Former George W. Bush, last Tuesday, breaking his long political silence addressed the conservative group saying that “Not only do immigrants help build our economy, they invigorate our soul,” Richard Land, with the Southern Baptist Convention, warned Republicans that they will “have to change their ways on immigration reform.” In November, Land, speaking for immigration reform before the American Enterprise Institute said "We have an obligation to treat others like we'd like to be treated, to love your neighbor as yourself," Yesterday, the Los Angeles Times reported that President Obama will “begin an all-out drive for comprehensive immigration reform, including seeking a path to citizenship” for 11 million undocumented immigrants, after Congress addresses the fiscal cliff.”

This Advent, we can discover some new opportunities as a society to repent and turn to God, and as people of good will finally find a way to work across religious and party lines to fix a horribly broken system which has proffered a lot of pain. After years of agony, and so many failed attempts, maybe this time, we will find our way as country through wilderness of immigration struggles to make the rough places plain and offer hope to many more in our midst.

What are you longing for this Advent season? Is it quiet amidst the craziness of the season? Is it joy filled fellowship and companionship to wipe away the loneliness? Do you long for justice in many different forms that is a long time coming? May Advent be a time for us to raise our hopes and aspirations that Jesus is coming while not falling into the pits of despair as a community and nation. As a church community, we want to help people follow John’s lead and find way their way through the wilderness and live into God’s promise of renewal and restoration. We are about welcoming all, we are about seeking God, and we are about doing justice. Perhaps, this Advent we can let this bold description from the early church found in Acts grip our imaginations. It typifies so much what Christian communities need to be about and what we need to be about.

I like to repeat it often: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the Apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

During Advent lets us be together as a community preparing the way for God’s promise that Jesus is alive and he is coming soon. Amen.

