

“Voice”

10 December 2006, Advent 2C

Luke 3:1- 6

the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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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.” ’

Prayer.

Heed the voice

that cries

“Prepare the way of the Lord!”

Heed the voice

that calls all flesh

to prepare to

“see the salvation of God.”

We spend great amounts of time

this season

making preparations:

gift and wrappings,

parties and decorations,

tree and trimmings.

We clean the house,

listen to Perry Como croon

“White Christmas,”

and perhaps even

roast some chestnuts over an open fire.

We make all kinds of preparations

for spouse and child,

for parent and sibling,

for cousin, friend, and neighbor,

But how much time or effort

do we take to

heed the voice?

to prepare the way of the Lord?

to see the salvation of God?

“Draw me a map”

I am fond of saying.

“Just tell me what to do”

we beg, pleading for simplicity,

hoping that salvation

can be reduced down to

recipe form.

If we listen

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to the text
we will hear the voice.

In ancient days
preceding time as we know it
memory would be indexed
by experience,
not by number.
When Tiberius was emperor
and Pilate was governor
and Herod was ruler.
Experience spoke
of the great and powerful
political happenings of the day.
Experience was rooted
in politics;
the art of government.
This is an effective means of dating
because all citizens are stakeholders
in the body politic,
in those who lead,
either by democracy, on the one hand
or ruthless abandon, on the other
or someplace in-between.

The gospel author
recognized that people
place their trust in those who lead them:
in emperor, governor, or ruler.
Trust for protection.
Trust for prosperity.
Trust that for every penny of taxation
they are getting something in return.
Trust that every problem
has a political solution.
Luke could see,
even as we can see through the lens of
history,
the hallow promise of politics
the fleeting security of human designs.
“If only we build the city walls higher and
stronger” thought Ahaz,
ignoring the prophecy of Isaiah,
as though it would even serve as

a speed bump
for Sennacherib and his Assyrian war
wagon.
“If only we pay homage to Rome,
certainly the emperor will protect us,”
Pharisaic Judaism thought
at the time of Jesus
even though in a mere forty years
Rome would lay waste to Jerusalem.
“If only we build the Maggot line”
the French schemed in their houses of
parliament
“that will certainly keep the Nazi
contained.”
“If only we remove Saddam Hussain”
we are guilty, too,
“then we can usher in peace and
prosperity
to the middle east.”

History is littered with
failed trust
broken promises
that security
can be achieved with a political solution.
All of which is to say
there is no political solution
to prepare the way of the Lord.

If we listen
to the text
we will hear the voice.

“During the high- priesthood of Annas
and Caiaphas”
our gospel author wrote;
leaving a trail
better than Reece’s Pieces
for us to follow.
Luke can see the power
organized religion held
over the people.
People trusted the Temple authorities.
They held the power

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to make the unclean clean.
 They held the power
 to judge guilt or innocence
 and to assess penalty and penance
 to unjust offenders.
 They were the ones
 who professed to have
 some kind of direct connection,
 some inside blessing,
 with the creator of all things.
 People placed their trust
 in the institution
 not in the Divine.
 What few will tell you
 is that under the robes
 is no fortune telling globe
 is no hot- line, red phone to God.
 Under the robe is
 nothing but underwear
 just like everyone else.
 Trust in the Temple of Pharisaic Judaism
 or the Synagogue of Rabbinic Judaism
 is no better than
 trust in the Roman Catholic Church
 or United Methodism.

History is littered with
 failed trust
 broken promises
 that salvation
 can be achieved with an institutional
 solution.
 All of which is to say
 there is no doctrine
 that will prepare the way of the Lord.

If we listen
 to the text
 we will hear the voice.

“The word of God came to John
 son of Zechariah
 in the wilderness,”
 Luke correctly reported.

The word didn't come
 to the great or to the powerful.
 It didn't come
 to the rich or to theologians.
 The word came to
 that last, the least, the lost out in the
 wilderness wild- man, John.
 And isn't that the way of God?
 The Spirit came to Mary,
 a teen- aged, unmarried girl.
 God came to a wondering Aramian,
 a herdsman named, Abraham.
 To John was given
 the voice
 of prophecy
 the voice
 of Isaiah
 echoing over 700 years
 heard only as a quiet reverberation
 heard only by those who listened intently
 heard only by the one
 chosen to be the voice
 of the herald bearer
 the predecessor
 of the Word made flesh
 Emmanuel
 the Lord, God Almighty.

John draws from this prophetic voice
 to draw the map
 to connect the dots for us:
 to make low the mountains
 and lift up the valleys
 to smooth out the rough places
 to make straight
 a highway for our God.

John preaches a baptism of repentance
 for the forgiveness of sins.
 Washing clean the sins we've committed
 by the plunging power of immersion
 beneath icy river waters
 lifts up the valleys.
 Repentance from sins

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- setting out on a new direction
 vowing never to transgress again –
 carves out the mountains and
 smoothes out the rough places.
 Remaking our lives
 to be in synchronous harmony with our
 God
 makes straight
 the highway that leads us to Christmas.

John's voice does not cry out
 from heaven above;
 it cries out from
 the wilderness
 which we've created,
 the garden
 which we've destroyed.
 John's voice cries out
 from where we are at
 that we might heed
 God's chosen mouthpiece,
 that we might change our ways,
 that we might prepare
 for the coming Lord
 and see
 the salvation of our God.

It is said that effective leaders
 spend a third of their time
 focused on the big things:
 vision, mission, and direction.
 (The second third is spent on leadership
 development.
 The third third is spent on operations,
 achievements, and goals,
 in case you wanted to know.¹)
 Too often leadership fails
 when it spends too much time
 in operations
 the details of production
 to the neglect of the larger picture.

¹ Believe it or not, this model of corporate leadership is taken
 from Bob Woodward's book [State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III](#),
 and his description of Donald Rumsfeld's style of
 leadership as the Secretary of Defense.

It becomes too easy to lose your way
 when your only focus is on
 meeting your immediate needs.
 Like business leaders
 disciples of Christ can learn from
 this example.
 Too often we focus
 on the details of daily living
 on the minutia of our immediate
 social and spiritual needs.
 We focus on
 trimming the tree
 purchasing and wrapping gifts
 lighting the Advent wreath
 or getting the Christmas play just right.
 When we do,
 too often we fail to
 see the larger picture
 to experience the greater vision:
 that this is a time of preparation,
 a season closer to its completion than it
 is to its beginning,
 that this is a time to
 make straight and smooth
 a highway for Christ to come once again.

Dearly beloved members and friends of
 Zion
 do not place your trust in political
 promises
 do not place your trust in organized
 religion
 place your trust and your attention
 only upon the Lord, our God.
 Heed the voice
 that cries
 "Prepare the way of the Lord!"
 Heed the voice
 that calls all flesh
 to prepare to
 "see the salvation of God."
 Amen.

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