

PREPARE THE WAY
LUKE 1:68-79; LUKE 3: 1-6; MALACHI 3: 1-4
SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
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Luke 1: 68-79

68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. 69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, 70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, 71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. 72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, 73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. 76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 78 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Malachi 3: 1-4

3 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight--indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; 3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

How blessed we are to have people like Bill who offer their musical gifts to the glory of God. On this Second Sunday of Advent, we might prefer a softer message than the one Malachi gives. We may be willing to come to church during Advent, but must we be refined, purified and scrubbed clean before Christmas?

Zechariah's message sounds more hopeful, although the Angel Gabriel did put him into time out for nine months. No wonder Zechariah was jubilant. His son John would teach people about their salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. John prepared the way of the Lord. *By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, Zechariah said, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

This week we light the candles of hope and peace. Christ brought the light of God into the world. Christ is coming again. Christ comes to us in the particular wilderness in which we live. Christ comes to us in communion by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ will come at the end of time.

John the Baptist urged people to prepare the way of the Lord. The Gospel of Luke placed John in a particular historical context, but John spoke the words of Isaiah, a prophet who brought hope hundreds of years earlier to the Jews in Babylon.

The message of Isaiah and John the Baptist is a message for all people at all times. The Lord is coming. Are we willing to turn our lives in a different direction to receive Christ during Advent? John

tells us to repent, turn, so that we prepare the way of the Lord. Listen to the Good News from the Gospel of **Luke 3: 1-6**.

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

Thanks be to God for the reading of this Holy Word. Please pray with me. Lord of all times and places, we give thanks for your messengers, even if their message is challenging. We thank you for Malachi, Isaiah, Zechariah and John the Baptist. Most of all, merciful God, we thank you for sending your son, Jesus Christ. By the power of your Holy Spirit, help us turn and change so that we are ready to receive Christ, whether it is this morning during communion, or at Christmas, or at the end of time. Cleanse us from the stain of sin. Purify us by the fire of your Truth. Call us in the midst of the wilderness in which we live. Empower us to prepare the way, for Christ is coming. We pray in the name of Jesus, Emmanuel Amen.

Gene Newton thought about driving to California for Christmas. He wanted to travel along Highway 50 through Colorado again. Then he considered the miles between towns. What would happen if their car broke down in the cold? When Nell found a good price on air tickets, Gene gave up the wilderness adventure and took the safer option.

In the days of Isaiah and Malachi, and even later in the first century, the wilderness was far more treacherous than the roads through Colorado in winter. In fact there were no roads or paths through much of what was called wilderness in those days. Predators in both human and animal form lurked in the wilderness. As our troops in Afghanistan know very well, making a way in the wilderness is difficult and dangerous. Yet that is what we are called to do: We are called to prepare the way of the Lord, because God is coming into the wilderness in which we live.

According to the gospel of Luke, John the Baptist spoke the words of the Prophet Isaiah from the Old Testament. Isaiah 40 reads: *A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.*

A wilderness need not be a wilderness of trees, brush, thorns and wild animals. Luke describes a wilderness of politics and economics. The Gospel of Luke identifies the rulers in John's time. They were known to be abusive, tyrannical and unjust. Life was difficult for Jews in the first century. Life is difficult today.

The voice of God cries out to us in the wilderness of our lives. God is coming. We must prepare the way of the Lord because God is coming. God will bring hope and peace. God will bring light to those who are in darkness and in the shadow of death. We have been given a candle of faith. We know God comes. We have the power to light the way for God to come to us and to others.

What is the wilderness we experience today? It is one of pain, illness, depression or grief? Are the predators we fear teachers, bullies, a supervisor, a boss or an abusive family member? Perhaps

addiction or the effects of addiction lurk in the shadows. Maybe it is finances, school, work or relationships that make the road rough right now.

The holidays are the best of times and the worst of times. Stress and unfulfilled expectations often push people over the edge. No one really has those perfect Hallmark holidays, but somehow the sense of disappointment and failure loom large during what is supposedly a joyous time of year.

My friends, hear the Good News. People can change. People can turn. People can make a path for the Lord to come, and with God, all things are possible.

There are two movies I want to see, partially because they reflect what John the Baptist and Isaiah tried to convey. The first is “One Peace at a Time,” which is showing at the Arbor in Austin ([Austin American Statesman](#), December 4, 2009). The producer, Turk Pipkin, asks viewers to believe in the power of one child, one classroom, one village, one brick, or one water well at a time. The movie chronicles the efforts of foundations and individuals that help Ethiopian villages develop clean water supplies operate a family style orphanage in India, provide a micro-credit bank for female entrepreneurs in Bangladesh and much more. Pipkin believes that we create world peace one step and one child at a time. According to a review in the [Austin American Statesman](#), the light of hope and peace shines in the eyes of the children. I would like to see that hope.

On a recent reunion tour of the rock group “Police,” Sting showed images photographer Bobby Sager collected of children in refugee camps. The photos provided a visual background for the popular song from the 80s, “Invisible Sun,” which was inspired by the situation in Northern Ireland. Sting was struck by the soccer ball the kids used in one Rwandan camp. It was made of rags and scraps tied together by twine. What if an indestructible ball could be produced and distributed? Bobby Sager took on the challenge. You will find a video of the distribution of the balls on the ABC News website (December 4, 2009). Look for hope in the children’s eyes: hope that springs from someone caring enough to give them a ball.

I would have liked to see the light of hope in the eyes of people receiving meals as part of the Thanksgiving Celebration last week. With your donations of funds and volunteer time, you prepared a way for Christ to come to over 800 people. You prepare the way this morning with the food and funds you give to the Caring Place.

There is a wilderness of financial need in this community right now. Over 250 children have been served as part of the Homeless outreach within the Georgetown school district. The bags of food you provide to children for the weekend prepare the way for Christ to come. Some of you prepare the way of the Lord by visiting people in care centers or offering rides to people who no longer can drive. We prepare the way of the Lord by every act of kindness. We are called to make a way for the Lord in the wilderness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer ([I Want to Live These Days With You](#), p. 355) said that as long as there are people, Christ will walk on earth as our neighbor, as the one through whom God calls us, speaks to us, makes demands on us. For Bonhoeffer this is the great seriousness and the great blessedness of the Advent message. If we do not see the face of Christ in a near face, Bonhoeffer does not believe we can receive Christ in our heart either.

The other movie I look forward to seeing is “Invictus,” which is directed by Clint Eastwood and stars Morgan Freeman as Nelson Mandela, the first black president of South Africa ([Homiletics](#), December

6, 2009, pp. 47-48). Mandela spent 27 years in prison before his election in 1994 as president. The hatred born of racism was a wilderness of the worst kind.

In 1995 South Africa hosted the Rugby World Cup Tournament. Rugby was largely a white man's sport. The entire South African team was white, representing a country that was 80% black. The team's symbol, a leaping gazelle called a "Spring-bok," reminded most black South Africans of the nation's racist history.

Faced with an over-whelming wilderness of economic and political challenges, Mandela showed up at the Rugby Team press conference before the tournament wearing a team jersey and a cap with a Spring-bok on it. "These are our boys, now," Mandela said. "They may all be white; but they're our boys. We must get behind them and support them in this tournament."

The next day the Spring-bok coach took the team to the prison where Mandela spent nearly three decades of his life behind bars. The coach said, "This is the cell where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. He was kept here for 27 years by the racist policies of our government. We tolerated his imprisonment for all those years, yet he has backed us publicly. We can't let him down."

The Spring-bok team performed far better than anyone expected in the tournament. When they made it to the finals, President Mandela was in the stands wearing his Spring-bok jersey. During a time-out, Mandela arranged for a children's choir to lead 65,000 people in singing a South African black miner's song.

When the Spring-boks returned to the field, they were unstoppable. They won the world cup. Blacks and whites celebrated together. They danced in the streets together. For the first time they thought of themselves as citizens of the same multiracial country. Mandela, the coach, the members of the rugby team and the children's choir prepared a way of the Lord. They prepared the way for hope and peace.

What wilderness do we see around us this morning? Whether we are the one crying out in a wilderness or the one preparing the way for God to come, the Good News is that Christ is coming. We may need to turn in a different direction to better receive Jesus. We may need to make some changes in our lives. Maybe we need to do something new or try something different. Perhaps we need to stop doing so much. Perhaps we need to be quiet and listen. It worked for Zechariah. *By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*"

Bonheoffer (Ibid) believed that through all the Advents of our lives runs the longing for the last Advent, when the word will be, "See, I am making all things new (Revelation 21:6). May God bless your journey through Advent. May Christ's light of hope and peace shine in your eyes. Amen.