

Crying in the Wilderness
Second Sunday of Advent
Home Moravian Church

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, 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."

Introduction

Advent is the time in the church year when Christians prepare for Christmas, just as Lent is a time when we prepare for Easter. Advent is the season when we begin decorating the church and our homes with greenery, stars, putzen, and candles. The various choirs are busy practicing music for Christmas, and we sign up dozens of volunteers to serve lovefeasts, hand out candles, and welcome visitors to Candle Tea and our Christmas Eve vigils. Of course, many of us are also decorating our homes with our own putzen or creches or nativity scenes. We bring evergreen trees inside and hang them with lights and ornaments. Some of us put candles in our windows or gigantic inflatable reindeer in our yards. We shop for presents, wrap presents, and exchange presents. In our house, there is also a lot of baking and eating cookies. There is so much going on around us, it can be hard to just sit quietly and wait.

I remember when I was a boy, I would sometimes tell my mom “I can’t wait” for this that or the other thing, and she would usually say, “well, you better learn because it won’t come any quicker if you worry about it.” But she also used to say that anticipation is part of the fun. And so, here we are today, waiting in eager anticipation for Christmas. Let’s all just take a deep breath and for a moment try to stop worrying about what’s on your to do list, your shopping list, and your activity list. Let’s take just a moment to ponder the Word of God for today.

Zechariah

Each of the four gospels begins differently. Mark starts with the baptism of Jesus. John starts with the beginning of creation. Matthew tells us about Joseph and his genealogy. This year we are focusing on Luke who doesn’t begin his Gospel with Jesus. He opens his gospel with an elderly couple named Elizabeth and Zechariah. Zechariah was a member of the priestly order, and his wife was a descendant of the first high priest Aaron, the brother of Moses. In other words, they were both in a long line of priests of Israel, and it was expected that their first born son would have become a priest as well.

But they had no children. As the years passed and they became frail, they still were not blessed with children. Then the day came when it was Zechariah’s turn to travel to Jerusalem and offer incense at the altar in the Temple. While he was all alone in the holiest part of the Temple, he had a vision of an angel who promised him that Elizabeth would have a son who would be an extraordinary prophet, like one of the prophets of Old. Like Samson, he should never drink wine, and like Elijah he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. He would be more than a priest; he would be a divine messenger. The angel even gave his name, John. He would have the gift of reconciling parents and children, and helping sinners repent and change their lives. He would proclaim justice and righteousness and would prepare people for the day of the Lord.

Waiting, waiting

As a priest, Zechariah probably knew the prophecy of Malachi that Ginny read earlier in the service. Malachi proclaimed that the Lord would send a messenger to the people who would purify them and bring justice and righteousness to the nation. Malachi warned the people that they might not like what the prophet had to say. They might find it hard to change their ways and live righteously. I imagine that Zechariah may have even prayed from time to time that this divine messenger would come during his lifetime, but I doubt that Zechariah ever imagined that he would have a part to play in his coming.

We are told that the priest Zechariah doubted the angel's words because he was an old man married to an old woman. It would take a miracle for them to have a baby. The angel responded to Zechariah's doubts by taking his voice away. When Zechariah left the Temple, everyone could tell from his expression that something strange and wonderful had happened. The priest had had a vision which had not happened in many years. They were curious about what happened, but Zechariah couldn't tell them what he had seen and heard. Think how frustrating that would be – to have a wonderful vision and great news but be forced to wait to tell people. He couldn't even go on Facebook and drop hints about what had happened. He had to wait.

Zechariah was forced to wait in silence until Elizabeth became pregnant. He had to wait in silence for months until the child was born. He had to wait in silence for eight more days until it was time for circumcision and Elizabeth named the boy John. Finally, his waiting was over and he could speak again. He told the people that Elizabeth had given the boy the correct name, the name given by the angel. He was John. It would be many more years before John would be called the Baptist. Zechariah had to wait, just as we are waiting. Waiting not just for Christmas but for the fulfillment of the promises of Christmas. Waiting for the day of the Lord when justice will triumph and no one will live in fear. Waiting for the day when the Lord wipes away all tears.

Once his waiting was over, Zechariah was inspired. He sang a blessing for his son. It was really a prophecy about the boy's life. John would teach people to live in righteousness and justice. He would be a light to those who sit in

darkness and the shadow of death. He would guide people on the way of peace. He was not be a ruler, but a messenger. We don't know what happened to Elizabeth and Zechariah after John's blessing. They may have died when the boy was still young because Luke tells us that he lived in the wilderness and grew strong in the Spirit until the day came for him to start preaching.

Wilderness

The wilderness is important in the Bible. Wilderness means the wild lands where there were no villages or farms or even fields for sheep. It was the land that humans had not been able to tame and make profitable. John lived in the wilderness, but he was not the first Israelite to spend time there. During the Exodus ,the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness as they learned to depend on God and be obedient to the covenant. The prophet Elijah once fled from the king's palace and found refuge in the wilderness where he was fed by ravens. When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, thousands of Israelites were forced thousands to cross the wastelands, and they weeped beside the waters of Babylon. During the long decades of the exile in Babylon, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed that God would one day lead them through the wilderness back to the Promised Land.

In the Bible, the wilderness is both a place of trial and a place where people learned to rely on God. The wilderness lonely and unpleasant, but it is a place where people learn about themselves and God. John the Baptist grew strong in the wilderness. Elsewhere he is described as being clothed in leather eating locusts and honey.

When he come out of the wilderness, he was a wild man preaching fearlessly. Luke says that he traveled throughout the Jordan Valley calling people to seek forgiveness for their sins, for their injustice and unrighteousness. He was the voice of one crying out in the wilderness warning people to prepare for the day of the Lord.

Luke makes a point of telling us that John began his preaching in the 15th year of the Emperor Tiberius when Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests, not

because they were important, but to highlight how unimportant they really were in this history. John the Baptist did not need their permission to preach or baptize. He did not conform to their rule, nor did he support the status quo. John was a wild man crying out because God's spirit was upon him.

Crying in the wilderness

For a couple of weeks now I'm been pondering one phrase in Luke's gospel. He is quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah who said, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness." I've been thinking about what it means to cry out in the wilderness. There is a song by a group called Four Non-Blonds called What's Up. The singer talks about crying in bed and then going outside, taking a deep breath, and screaming at the top of her lungs "What's Going On?" Many times in recent years, I have had the urge to scream at the top of my lungs, "what's going on."

You probably don't know this about me, but there are times when I howl to moon, sky, or even the ceiling. When I got a phone call that my beloved nephew was terminally ill, I pulled off on the shoulder of 421 and howled in pain. There have been other times when I have screamed, sometimes silently, as I've lost people I've loved or seen others suffer from illness, injustice, and oppression. And there have been times when I felt lost. And I'm not the only one. In recent years, we've heard many people crying out for justice, for respect. It appears there are no safe havens from storms and wildfires and other disasters. We hear people shouting, What's going on?

This week it dawned on me that the wilderness is not just a place in the Bible; it is a symbol. The wilderness is not where, it's when. The wilderness is a symbol of those times when we feel isolated and alienated from our families and society itself. Even if we live in the city or suburbs, we can be in the wilderness. It is those times when you are feeling so vulnerable you have to hide from the world. The times when you are feeling so dry and barren that you wonder if you will survive. The wilderness is when we feel lost and can't make sense of what is going on around us.

I wonder how us in this congregation have known what it is like to cry out in the wilderness or are crying out now. I wonder how many of our neighbors, our friends, people in this city are crying in the wilderness, hoping someone will hear. The story of Jesus begins with the prophet John coming out of the wilderness preaching. It was in the wilderness that he found that he was not alone. The Spirit of God was with him. God was equipping him for the work he was called to do. It didn't matter who was the emperor, or governor, or high priest. What mattered was that the son of Zechariah came out from the wild lands, crying with righteous anger, shouting in pain because he saw the injustice of the world. And proclaiming that salvation was at hand. The Baptist came out of the wilderness inviting everyone to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Christmas

I bet you are wondering what all of this had to do with Advent and our preparations for the coming of Christ. Luke's gospel reminds us that there is more to Advent than decorating, baking, hanging stars, wrapping gifts, and lighting candles. Advent is a time to reflect on our lives and the world around us. Advent is a time to pause and take a deep breath. It is okay if you then cry out if that's what you need to do. Like John, we will find that we are not truly alone in the wilderness. God is with us. Paul in our Philippians text wrote to the Philippians about his time in prison and how much it meant to him that they remembered him and supported him when he was lost.

Advent is a time to open our ears and listen to those around who are crying out in pain, grief, and fear; to listen to the anguish of injustice; to hear the prayers for mercy and comfort. Advent is a time hang our stars, light our candles, and sing our hymns because know what it is like to sit in the darkness, cry in the wilderness, and feel the shadow of death around us. And to offer comfort and support to those who feel lost.

Advent is a time to experience God's spirit strengthening and giving us hope that one day the crooked ways will be made straight. We wait, not just for Christmas, but for the hope that Christmas brings. We hang our stars, light our

candles, and sing our hymns because we know that Christ is our true light, and we pray that he will guide our feet in the way of peace. May we help build that highway for those who are wandering in the wilderness. Praise be to Christ.

Offering

I invite you to offer your gifts so that we can offer mercy to those who are crying in the wilderness, to offer hope to those who are thirsty for righteousness and justice, and to bring light and joy to those who are sitting in darkness.