

**December 9, 2018 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent**  
**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**Baruch 5:1-9, Luke 1:68-79,**  
**Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6**

(Journey with Jesus: Debie Thomas' blog post entitled From the Wilderness posted on 12-2-18)

**Let us pray...**

May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Holy One. Amen

**Grace and peace to you, beloved people of God.**

**Before we go too far today on this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent**, as we make our way toward Christmas,

I'd like to take a moment to piece together the passages that are before us.

They flip back and forth through the years, through the history, through the salvation story.

**Last Sunday**, our Gospel came from nearly the end of Luke, and it was an end-times text.

It was about the coming of Christ,

not Christ Jesus coming as a baby in the manger, but Christ's second coming.

**This week's Gospel sounds more advent-y**, if you will,.

We hear John the Baptizer, crying "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

But remember that John and Jesus are peers, cousins of a sort.

And it's a *grown up* John preparing the way for a *grown up* Jesus.

To find the babies, we look back to the first and second chapters of Luke, 20 some years earlier.

John's parents Elizabeth and Zechariah had experienced years of infertility, how they yearned for a baby.

It's Elizabeth that young Mary first trusts when she learns she is pregnant with Jesus.

It's with Elizabeth that Mary sings her Magnificat, "My soul magnifies the Lord...you have lifted up the lowly."

It's Elizabeth who also, somehow, a miracle, is pregnant with John.

When the angel Gabriel comes to tell Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, this news, it's Zechariah who questions the angel's word and then endures the pregnancy unable to speak...at all.

It's Zechariah who finally, at John's birth, his tongue unbound, sings out his own joy, the Benedictus, we now call it, "Blessed be the God of Israel who comes to set us free..."

Zechariah's song is assigned today as our psalm (it's #250—we'll sing it after the sermon)

When John (grown up John), cries out in the wilderness: Prepare the way, make the path straight,

he's borrowing words he'd have learned at the synagogue with his own folks,

words the prophets like Isaiah and Baruch offered to a people in exile longing for a way home.

I pray this context helps tie these important passages together.

**Maybe Luke is rubbing off on me, for in Luke, context, location matters.**

Luke wasn't trying to make life rough for a would-be lector with all those big words.

Rather, Luke, the historian-Luke, was placing this passage, this snippet, in time and history. With concentric circles he narrows in placing us in a specific emperor's reign, a certain governors term, and then, with the circles growing smaller still, the jurisdiction of three regional leaders. Finally, he notes the religious powers of the era, the chief priests. As Debie Thomas writes, "That's seven seats of wealth, power, and influence in just one sentence. Seven centers of authority, both political and religious. Seven Very Important People occupying seven Very Important Positions.

**But God's word doesn't come to any of them."**

**Luke tell us, "The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in... the wilderness."**

**The Word of God comes in the wilderness.... Don't you wonder: why the wilderness?**

Maybe the wilderness teaches us our need for God, our vulnerability

It's there, in the desolate land, that God speaks most clearly.

Or perhaps in that vulnerability, wilderness shows us our need for repentance, brings us to our knees.

Maybe the lesson is about power: How power can block one's ears from hearing God's Word.

**As much as wilderness lands and waters**, are the place where I feel so connected to God, and maybe you do too, what struck me this week is this:

**We can't stay in the wilderness, but we need to go there, we need to venture out.**

The people were streaming from the city to hear the Word from this John-fellow, quirky, and compelling.

They needed to hear the call to repent, to turn, in a different way.

Like their ancestors, they knew that same yearning for a smooth road, a level path.

They know that promise: All flesh shall see the salvation of God.

But in the hustle and bustle, in the centers of power, sometimes we forget the truth that the salvation, the healing of God is for all flesh, not just the somebodies with a name, a place, a title.

Rather: ALL flesh shall see the salvation of God.

That's the kind of work we do in the wilderness.

That's what John was up too with his strange mix of judgment and mercy.

**We can't stay in the wilderness, but literally or figuratively, we need to go there.**

For the truth is, we live in the world of powers, like even the people of Jesus' time, Luke's time.

We're enmeshed in these powers, responsible for and to them in many complex ways.

And yet in order to gain perspective, in order to ground and live out our faith, at times we step away:

We're called out to the wilderness places and situations to hear again the Word of God,  
the path we must take,  
the work that God has for us,  
the tender mercy and salvation that Jesus brings, that we and our community's need so desperately.

**We can't stay in the wilderness, but as individuals and as a community we need to go there.**

**Two years ago in Advent, December of 2016,** we had a memorable set up here in the sanctuary.

We moved to the side the usual churchy things—the altar, the pulpit, the tall candles.

In their place we hauled in a loveseat and armchairs, some lamps, and a rug, a coffee table to hold our Holy Communion and the advent candles.

We remembered how God sends Jesus to be born right smack in the middle of our lives,  
the middle of our living rooms, our dorm rooms,  
in the middle of the holiday's hubbub, the stress of exams and papers,  
the deep loneliness of these dark December days.

**That December,** after that November's election, the immigrant community was uneasy, terrified, really.

The new administration had signaled that additional deportations were imminent.

Words like sanctuary were on the lips and hearts and minds of many.

Today sanctuary and immigration seem like the norm here at Hope, but that December, in this strangely set up worship space, literally around the coffee table, our leaders began to ask:

Should our church become a Sanctuary Congregation, offering safe space, shelter, sanctuary, to an individual or family facing deportation orders?

Does our understanding of Jesus' gospel call us to step out in this bold and vulnerable way?

...To trust our faith, not knowing how the powers might react, not knowing the end of the story,  
but hearing the need, seeing Christ in our neighbor?

We were talking about Sanctuary, in the heart of our sanctuary.

Oh my goodness, the Holy Spirit started something powerful in those Advent days—she was so active.

**In those discernment conversations** we entered the wilderness and listened carefully.

In late January we became a Sanctuary congregation.

So often our congregation functions in the space of power: we root ourselves in the powers of government and religion and social order and wealth and university status, we know how these systems function.

But this work of immigration nudges us into a changing wilderness landscape:

the laws are influx,

the injustice of racism is real,  
the violence—some fueled by our own government’s policies and practices—continues,  
real people—people we love—with real stories are fighting to survive.

**We can’t stay in the wilderness, but we need to venture there long enough to hear God’s Word, and God’s call on our faith.**

The immigration and sanctuary team here at Hope is ready to help us learn about our broken immigration system and ways we can advocate at the state level for changes, like drivers licenses.

**John cried in the wilderness: All flesh shall see the salvation of God.**

I began this morning with context, with location—Zechariah and Elizabeth’s, John’s, Mary’s, Jesus’.

These stories of our ancestors, our people, are richer when we understand the context.

The opportunities these last years to hear the stories of our kin who are immigrants has only confirmed for me this reality: the more we understand the context, the richer, the more powerful the story.

To their stories, we add our own context,

our complex webs,  
the politics of this time, layered with history,  
our deep faith and yearning and hopes and dreams.

Knowing our context, our story—the story of our ancestors, and the story of our times and our hearts,  
makes us powerful, **for our flesh, too, shall see the salvation of God.**

**Dearly beloved, may we together** have the creativity and courage to “Wholly reimagine the landscape,” to level the road, to make the rough ways smooth,

With all flesh, may we see the salvation of God.

And most of all, may the tender mercy and compassion of + Jesus meet you wherever you are this day, and may it take you where you need to go. Amen.