

St. Paul's Congregational Church
December 9, 2018, Advent 2C
Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The signs of the season are certainly here, aren't they: wreaths and candles - we can watch the coming of the Light each week as well as our Advent wreath here gets slowly brighter. On Friday night I saw the Christmas show at the Papermill Theater – Holiday Inn – it was great! And there are Christmas trees, special music, the shopping and the baking, crowded stores, the post office is buried under the weight of packages to be delivered, Christmas cards are beginning to arrive – though I haven't gotten them out of my closet yet! Christmas is fast approaching – no doubt about it. And there's added activity here at the church!

You all know as well as I do that there's more to this season than all of this – that advent means coming, preparing for the arrival of the Lord. We're supposed to take time to slow down, to enter into this season of penitence and preparation intentionally, looking ahead to the birth of our savior. And we here at St. Paul's are on a journey of looking ahead, trying to discern where and how God is calling us to serve in the future – we're looking ahead to the birth of something new here, grounded by our faith in God.

This time of preparation for Christmas is a time of highs, but often roller coaster emotion isn't it - highs are higher – our children are getting more excited every day – their joy is a wonderful thing. But this year – as with too many other years in the past – there are also such deep lows as well. Those lows are lower during this season as well.

Our advent wreath glows with the light of hope – and today we lit the candle of peace – I have come to worship today, longing for the day when the light of hope and peace will burn brightly around the world – and I wonder, can it be? Ever?

The good news is this, though: wherever we are right now, this passage in Luke has something for all of us. This short gospel passage can touch us with any of its themes – for this passage is about universality. It's about wilderness. It's about expectations. It's about promise.

Luke gives us very specific details about the historical context, naming rulers and regions of the world of his time. Throughout his

writings, he talks about the spread, the movement of the gospel through all the world to all people. The poor, the lame, the blind, and the high priests, synagogue leaders, city officials, leading women, ship captains, guards, governors, kings – everyone hears the good news.

This story is for all of us, for all times. His attention to detail tells us that our religion, our faith, the very shape of our beliefs is related to the realities of the world, the very reality we are all living today. The aftermath of yet another massacre of innocents. The realities of our joys and sorrows. Our angers and happiness. Our frustrations and celebrations. Our disappointments and successes. Our worries and reliefs. The decisions we're trying to make, the tasks waiting for us at home, the list goes on, doesn't it.

Isn't Luke telling us through his detail of his time that the good news of the gospel has everything to do with our daily lives – it's not separate. It's universal! There's a reality that we bring with us our own agenda that never leaves us. Our own wilderness that's very much a part of us. Just as it was for those who lived in his time.

Our own wilderness of financial worries, of loneliness, of sickness, of mourning, of fear, of being too busy or not busy enough, of feeling worn down and worn out, of family difficulties, of the feeling of losing control – all this is the wilderness of real life, isn't it. Even those of us with a deep and abiding faith find ourselves at times wondering, why? How much more can I take, can we take? We try to keep our wilderness at bay – but it doesn't always work. Sooner or later we find ourselves lost, overwhelmed. Yearning, yearning for hope, yearning for a deep and lasting peace.

I think all this can be intensified in a holiday season like this when we're surrounded by joy and cheer and high emotions. Sure can be lots of noise coming at us.

And out of that noise, that wilderness comes John's voice – prepare. Prepare the way of the Lord – here in the midst of life. The way to Christ leads through the wilderness. How true that is.

Through all the noise, the stimulation of the season, the voices of the news reporters – what voice do you hear calling? What do we have to let go of to prepare the way of the Lord? What must we do to open the path for God's love to enter in and through us? Are we prepared to seek a new life, to turn aside from all that keeps us from living God's way of love and justice for all? Are we prepared to give up our control and give it over to God? Are we prepared to repent and change our behavior and our hearts to build a community living in hope based on God's signs all around us? Are we prepared to look at ourselves - at our own behaviors, our own words that

cause pain? Are we prepared to do our part in living in peace through justice? Is that community God calls us into made up of our family, schoolmates, friends, strangers in town, neighbors in the world? Sometimes the most painful wilderness is right in our immediate family – where we live right now – where relationships are strained, where hurts run deep, where dreams for wholeness are just that – dreams and yearnings for what used to be or perhaps what never really was. But the dream for peace and justice lives on in all of us. We all want that. And God calls us to that dream.

Every year when we receive gift requests from families in need we get a glimpse of the wilderness that these families are experiencing – gift requests are usually so simple – warm clothes, pajamas, socks, underwear even, and if we are fortunate enough to come to know some of their stories, we are caught short realizing the blessings we have and how much we take for granted in our own lives. The challenge comes to keep the Food Banks full all year – people are hungry on St. Patrick’s Day and the Fourth of July, aren’t they. The need that’s all around us never goes away.

There is a way out of the wilderness for all of us but it is not our path. It’s God’s path. We simply can’t find it or do it alone. We have to give up control in order to find our way. And that’s where we can get stuck. But hear these magnificent words again: every valley shall be filled. Every mountain and hill shall be made low, the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth.

This passage is about God’s power, not ours. It’s about God’s control, not ours. It’s about the power and purpose of God – that all flesh, all people, shall see the salvation of God. It’s up to us to prepare the way through the wilderness – empty ourselves of that which gets in the way, which keeps us from seeing the path that’s always there. What is that for each of us? Only we know what’s inside ourselves – only we know what we must give up, change, for what we must repent. And then only we can take the steps to do it. But we don’t have to do it alone – we can’t.

If God can level mountains, fill valleys, make the crooked straight, make the path smooth, God can and certainly will walk with us as we begin to take the steps that will bring us back into relationship with God, our families, our neighbors. And move us back onto the path of hope and peace. And help us continue on the path of joy and love.

This is when the theme of expectation comes: every year during advent we preach “coming” – the expectation of Jesus’ birth. What indeed is it that we expect? Jesus was born two centuries ago. We believe that Jesus is here with us through the Holy Spirit. So yes, we celebrate and remember the coming of Christ to earth. But I think what it is we can expect

is the Presence of Christ that is without season. We expect not out of a sense of entitlement, but out of a sense of faith that God in Jesus is with us – as we work on our discernment of the purpose of God in our own lives, as we walk through our wilderness with God alongside of us, as we turn away from old ways through our repentance and willingness to change. We can expect God to be with us – Jesus’ presence, the power of the Holy Spirit, not out of entitlement but out of grace. A gift freely and abundantly given to all of us, both when we’re in the wilderness and when we, however briefly, have that glimpse of the wonder and power of God’s love and purpose. When we sense the oneness, the love, the care, that God wants for us, what God has for us. When we give up control, when we listen to and hear that still, small voice. Christ’s presence is with us, for all people, in all seasons. We can count on that.

Luke’s themes are for all days: all are welcome. Chief priests, kings, the blind, the lame, the desperately poor. No social, political, economic restrictions exist in God’s world. And our challenge is to help make those restrictions, that wilderness, go away. We’re not promised that we’ll avoid the wilderness but we are promised God’s presence on our way.

So, let us repent of all that separates us from God and each other. Let us live into the profound hope that Jesus brings, let us each do our part to bring peace to this broken world – there is no small contribution to peace, is there. As we look into the flames of hope and peace on our Advent wreath, let us savor the promise God has made real in the coming of his Son, Jesus into our world. May our lights shine more brightly as we join in the promise: as we open ourselves and prepare the Way of the Lord.

Let us pray: O God, the gift of new life, new light, can be a gift truly only if we open ourselves to receive it. Open our eyes, Lord, to see your glory in the coming again of light each day; open our ears to hear the angels’ hymn stirring within us of joy at the coming of the child; open our hearts to the transforming power of your love as it comes to us through those around us. Help us to face and walk through the wilderness of our own lives; help us to change that which must be changed, repent of those thoughts and deeds which separate us from you, and turn us toward your path. Help us to accept your love and forgiveness, O God. And in turn, help us to love and forgive others.

We thank you, O God, for this season of celebration, of preparation, of recognizing your eternal presence among us. Help us to live in hope, to live in peace, that we have room in our hearts for your way, not only our own. We thank you that you provide nourishment for our journey at your Table and through people whose lives touch our own. May we recognize

your word in them. May we be instruments of your word. May you be born within us that by words and deeds of love, we may bear the tidings of your birth to a world that dies for a lack of love. All this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen