

Second Sunday of Advent - Year C – December 6, 2015
Baruch 5:1-9; Canticle 4 (The Song of Zechariah, Luke 1:68-79); Philipians1:3-11;
Luke 3:1-6

By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

“Prepare the way of the Lord”... “Grace breaks through impasses of every kind.”

Our gospel passage today began with a long list of the political and religious luminaries of the day. Even if this was just to date the story and state its historical context, we can't escape the irony that in the midst of all that power and prestige, in the midst of all those important titles and positions, the Word of God did not come first to mighty rulers or high priests, but to someone who was almost completely off the grid of mainstream society—to one named John out in the desert. This Word overlooked the ruling powers, both secular and religious, and went instead to the edges of acceptability—to the wilderness.

In our Advent Scriptures, John the Baptist is a figure whom we meet up with each year, and this is no accident. It's a way of telling us that we all need to wake up, clean up our act, pay attention, and prepare *ourselves* to say Yes to God who comes to us in the person of Jesus who lived and died as one of us, and is Risen from the dead—for we need his presence and power in our lives and in our world—this same Jesus who continually seeks to abide with us and enlist us in his ongoing mission of repairing this broken world.

However, in order to meet the God-become-human we have to prepare ourselves. Of course at this time of the year we know what preparation is: as we work on holiday gift lists, trudge through mountains of mail order catalogues; as we overspend, overeat, over party, overextend ourselves, and generally wind up anxiously frazzled! Of course, we also know a better kind of preparation in the rituals we each have – in putting up the Christmas tree, cooking special foods, opening Advent calendars; in preparing an Advent wreath and putting out the crèche; in our Advent liturgies, caroling and engaging in acts of generosity through our churches, schools and workplaces.

But John the Baptist called for an even deeper level of preparation. The prophet Isaiah's words of consolation, quoted in our gospel—as well as the prophecy we hear in our first reading from Baruch, a contemporary of Isaiah; both envision a way through all the wilderness impasses as the *geographic* route through which their fellow Judeans would travel home after their exile in Babylon. John, on the other hand, called his contemporaries more than five hundred years later to prepare the way of the Lord and make a right pathway to God *first in their own hearts, through the impasses of their interior wilderness*. Prepare the way of the Lord and make a straight—a right—pathway through the windings of sin and the rough ways of selfishness and fear, through the mountains and hills of arrogance, and the valleys of discouragement and despair—so that God can make a home in your heart. John's message of conversion calls for a reordering of both personal *and* societal priorities with the understanding that we share a common humanity and common longings as children of God. Let's get turned around in the right direction

and have our eyes and ears and hearts opened up wide enough to meet God coming into our midst. This is John's message, and he was completely unequivocal on this point.ⁱ

Our two main Biblical companions in the Advent journey are both John the Baptist and his denunciations, and Mary and her annunciation. Darkness is always something we would rather ignore. But John reveals an important Advent truth: no darkness, no light; no denunciation, no annunciation. If we can appreciate the denunciation, we can be ready for the annunciation. So, as an integral part of preparing the way, John called out and denounced spiritual short-sightedness, moral deafness and narrow mindedness of his contemporaries—from religious leaders focused on rules and rituals who forgot the bonds of their common humanity; to the hurriedness and harriedness of many ordinary folk who seemed unable to reflect God's presence in their lives; to the unlawful marriage contracted by King Herod—a denunciation that literally cost John his head. John the Baptist made it clear that we can only say “Yes” to God in Christ coming into our midst by also being able to say a focused “No” to evil, fear, ignorance and injustice in our hearts and in the wider world. Only then can we prepare the way of the Lord instead of preventing it or getting in the way.

As I said at the beginning, Luke went to great lengths to situate this preparatory proclamation in its regional and geo-political context of the day. This same metaphor of God's desert highway is applicable to our day, whether in our personal lives, or in public places of violent conflict far away or in the political and social impasses closer to home. John the Baptist still calls us today to make straight in our hearts and our world a highway for God, and to reorder personal and societal priorities. As commentator Martin Smith put it, “Those who long for a world of fairness, compassion, sharing and justice are always told that the obstacles to these goals are insurmountable, so we must settle for less. The essence of [John's] prophecy is the courageous exposure of the fictitious character of these supposed obstacles to justice. There is a way forward to the reign of God; [and] Grace breaks through impasses of every kind.”ⁱⁱ

ⁱ John the Baptizer reveals the dual nature of the gospel as both *annunciation* of the good news of Emmanuel, God-with-us, and *denunciation* of all that keeps us from receiving God-in-us. So Luke records John's cry shouted in the desert and describes his mission: to prepare the way and to proclaim a major turn in the course of history. In one final series of events which would fulfill all former preparations, God was about to appear in a way that God could actually speak to human beings, and humanity could hear God's voice—in other words, in human form. John the herald voice of Advent, calls us to prepare for the act of God that strikes down falsehood, selfishness, hopelessness—even death—in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Paraphrasing Frederick Buechner, according to John the Baptist, the Kingdom of God and God's Messiah were coming all right, but if you thought it was going to be like some afternoon tea party you'd better think again. You'd better shape up; and don't think your ancestry and religious affiliation and the privilege and prestige that go with that will get you any extra points. You need to clean up your life as if your life depended on it, which it does, John insists—and get baptized, which for John was a public sign that you were serious about the process of cleaning up your life. No one ever accused John the Baptist of being the life of the party. But if he wasn't fun, he sure was important. See Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 69-70.

ⁱⁱ Martin L. Smith, “The Desert Highway” in *Sojourners* (Washington D.C.: December 2012), Dec. 9 entry.