

2 Advent
Christ and Grace
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Song of Zechariah, Luke 1:68-79 Luke 3:1-6
December 9, 2018

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.

These words from the Song of Zechariah express the joy of Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth after the birth of a long awaited son, who would grow up to become John the Baptizer. And really you can't understand John the son of Zechariah if you don't go back in time a bit to Zechariah and Elizabeth, to hear their story, because when God sent the angel Gabriel to tell him they would have a son, Zechariah questioned the heavenly messenger because it seemed impossible. Elizabeth was barren and they weren't spring chickens any more! The time was long gone for Elizabeth to bear a child.

I think God might have decided Zechariah was going to be a problem, because the next thing you know, he was mute, unable to speak until after the child was born. They named the baby John, which means "Yahweh is gracious" and only then did Zechariah's voice return, and he sang with joy, repeating all that Gabriel had told him John would become. John was to be the prophet of the Most High, going before the mighty Savior to prepare his way. Zechariah was certain of this, and why wouldn't he be, after having a nine month silent retreat to ponder the angel's words!

And so we meet up with John today in Luke's gospel. Luke gives us the whole list of VIP's in the political and religious circles - the emperor, the governor, regional rulers, and high priests. But the word of God did not come to any of those illustrious political and religious leaders. No, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. John was not in a business meeting, not on vacation, not at a party, not on his cell phone or watching TV. John was in the wilderness.

According to Luke, John spent most of his life in the wilderness. In the Hebrew scriptures, wilderness usually referred to the area between Egypt and the Promised Land where the children of Israel wandered with Moses, trying to understand the responsibility of being God's chosen people. In the New Testament, wilderness referred to a narrow strip of desert to the east of the Jordan River. And it was to this wilderness that both John and Jesus went to be alone with God. It was here where they wrestled with their demons and became clear about their call and their mission. Being in the wilderness was about more than location. It was a place where time as they knew it disintegrated and yet seemed eternal. Had it been days or a week? Months or a year? A few years or a decade?

That was wilderness for Moses and the children of Israel, for John, and for Jesus. But what about us? Where is our wilderness? Where is the place where we wrestle with our demons and where God draws near to us and helps us discover our call and mission?

Most everyone would say there is nothing comfortable about being in the wilderness, so if we find ourselves uncomfortable we might want to consider that we could be in a wilderness. Uncomfortable things like being in between jobs, having marital problems, living with an

uncertain medical diagnosis, having no friends at school, or struggling with depression can make us feel as if we have wandered into a wilderness from which there is no escape.

And when we are in a wilderness we tend to lose our concept of time. If we are in the wilderness of a terminal disease, time may pass much too quickly. If our biological clock is ticking away and we cannot have children, like Elizabeth, we fear time will run out. On the other hand, when we hope for a loved one to admit to a drug problem and seek help, or when we long to be forgiven and reconciled with someone we have hurt, the wilderness waiting can seem like an eternity.

But John, son of Zechariah, prophet of the Most High, knew all about the wilderness and came out of it to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, the coming of the Messiah, and the need for the people to prepare the way. He knew from experience the uncomfortable difficulty of being in the wilderness, and of the need for repentance, but he also knew the certainty of forgiveness. Using Isaiah's imagery of road building, he helped the people understand that road building is not easy nor can one person do it alone, but that it takes everyone working together.

In the second year of the reign of Donald Trump, when Ralph Northam was governor of Virginia, and Samuel Parham was mayor of Petersburg, and Holly Hollerith was Bishop of the Diocese of Southern Virginia and Robin Teasley was the new priest, the word of God came to the people of Christ and Grace in the wilderness. The people heard 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.'" Today the word of God continues to come not to the illustrious political and religious leaders, but to each one of you, right where you are.

No matter what wilderness we inhabit, we can be heavenly messengers to one another, helping one another get through the crooked paths, deep valleys and high mountains. Together we prepare the way of the Lord and make the rough ways smooth so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

As we enter a new liturgical year and end our calendar year, our annual parish meeting allows us to look back to review what has been accomplished, to note where we are on the journey, and to elect new leadership. All of this prepares the way for us to move forward into a new year. There have been some times of wilderness in all the changes of retirements and interim time and adjusting to new clergy. Change can be challenging but it can also bring new opportunity. My prayer is that we will all embrace these changes together as we watch and pray for what comes next.

The good news is that God has drawn near to help us discover our call and mission, as individuals and as followers of Jesus at Christ and Grace. When we hear the call, and then take action, we too become God's prophets in this world. At first, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, we may question the circumstances that seem impossible. Yet, no matter how miraculous it might seem, no matter that we are no longer spring chickens, or that we really do not like change all

that much, or that we believe we are barren of new ideas and dreams and opportunities, God draws near to us, saying, “You, my children, shall be called prophets of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.”

Amen.