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St. Barnabas Episcopal Church  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent/Year C  
December 9, 2018  
Text: Luke 3:1-6

This past Wednesday I joined millions of others watch some of the live coverage of the service for the late President George H.W. Bush. As the procession moved into and within the National Cathedral, I watched with a little bit of pride, the Episcopal Church bring before the nation a beautiful liturgy filled with solemnity, pageantry, soaring music, and heartfelt reflections. Early on as the casket made its way from the hearse to its resting place on the bier, it struck me more than any other time that no matter the title, station, pedigree, political bend or the amount of education, money, even power one held or holds in this thing called life, death is the great equalizer. Yet even in the midst of death and sorrow there is still life and we heard those familiar words of hope and promise of Jesus as found in the Burial Rite in our Book of Common Prayer:

*I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord.  
Whoever has faith in me shall have life,  
Even though he die.\**

We continued to hear other words of comfort found in the scriptures, heartfelt accolades, and thankfully some moments of laughter as the service continued to unfold. And as cameras scanned the Nave and the faces of those present, one could not help but take note of the many hundreds who gathered there. It was truly a ‘who’s who’ in that sacred space. Among family members and close friends there were past presidents and first ladies, past vice-presidents and their wives, government officials, national and international dignitaries, Church leaders who crossed various denominations, and a myriad of others who perhaps hold varied positions of power, power enough to effect positive change for the our nation. Changes that could effect the plight of thousands who are held down or held back by unjust and inadequate systems across the board. And I could not help but wonder if among these persons of power if there was at least one among them who could or would rise up and champion such a transition to make long and lasting differences in a nation and perhaps a world longing for rebirth and relief.

On this second Sunday of Advent Baruch says to the people take off garments of sorrow and affliction and put on the robe of righteousness and God will give you the name, “Righteous Peace, Godly Glory”; the Song of Zechariah

proclaims that a child, Zechariah's child, shall be the prophet of the Most High and reminds those walking in darkness that God will guide our feet into the way of peace ; and Paul tells the church at Philippi his prayers are constant and that his wish for all is that love would overflow among them. And then we hear without fail, someone crying out once again from the wilderness as he does every year at this time.

John the Baptizer, that pesky prophet and son of Zechariah, appears in all four gospels but only Luke gives us the kind of introduction we get today. Luke who was not an eye witness but a convert to the faith, picks up his pen as a historian, setting the stories of John the Baptizer and of Jesus within the context of rulers and history. If you noticed, John is included in Luke's list of 'who's who.' In a single verse Luke names for us emperors, governors, rulers and high priests of the day, and then John. It was not to the big mucky mucks of the day but to John that the word of God comes.

God chose a rather strange nobody to be God's prophet, the one who would prepare the way for God's own Son to dwell among humankind. God was known to do that, to use ordinary everyday folks to be God's hands and voice in the world. And John would be different than other prophets of old for he was destined to announce the coming of the One promised Israel, the One who would set them free, a mighty savior who would save them from their enemies, the One who would dispel the darkness. He would also preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Luke only begins to give us an introduction to John's ministry and only a snippet of John's message in today's passage and true to form, John minces no words. Mike Kinman, one of the great wordsmiths among preachers, says that "John's language is that of a bulldozer plowing through any obstacle for God's homecoming."\*\*

Calling out from the wilderness John used the words of Isaiah and proclaimed: "*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.*" In other words; your deliverance is at hand. Straighten up! Get ready for your redemption. Get ready to receive your Messiah. Repent! Turn your lives around!

At this past week's Wednesday Evening Prayer service, the interim pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Living Christ, Pastor Mary Drew, shared that as she prepared her thoughts for the evening and of course for today's service, she puzzled over John's cry over paths being made straight and hills and mountains being leveled. She remembered back to the beginning of November when she agreed to accompany her sister on a four day truck drive from the St. Louis area to somewhere along the outer Florida coast. Pastor Mary recalled how wonderful it was driving those thousands of miles with their long and winding roads. How breathtaking it was to explore and experience all the hills and valleys and mountains along the way. So why on earth, she asked herself, would John say that everything needed to be on a level plain? Why not let things be the way they are? We like things as they are. But Pastor Mary said she came to realize that those paths, those winding roads, those hills and valleys and mountains were quite different those which John spoke of.

And that is why during each and every season Advent we hear John's voice crying out loud and strong from the wilderness, "*Prepare the way of the Lord!*" His is the voice reminding us that we need to straighten out our hearts and minds so that we can prepare to receive our salvation and our God. Reminding us that we are to make room for our Savior and not just for our houseguests who will visit during the holidays. Reminding us that the preparations we do now for Christmas go beyond the usual cleaning and baking and cooking and gift buying; that we should always live our lives preparing for the One who has already come and walked among humankind and continues to walk us and will come again on the Last Day.

We do indeed, need to hear again and again John's cry; the craziness of it, the shrillness of it, the harshness of it, the sense of emergency in it. We need to hear the voices of other prophets, prophets for today, who are not afraid to cry out in John's stead. Prophets who are not afraid to pick up John's mantle and bulldoze through rhetoric, empty promises, and false truths but who are willing and able to speak aloud God's truth in this our time in history. For there are enough people and things and situations that unfortunately keep God's great work of leveling the landscape at bay, that keep justice and mercy and equality and forgiveness and peace beyond the reach *all* persons. There are enough people and things and situations that take our focus away from loving one another and recognizing God's presence in the world. But all is not lost dear friends.

It all sounds like a job for the most powerful and influential, the folks who have the means to get things done. Nothing against those who have, mind you.

But as we have seen again and again in scripture and within our lifetime, God often chooses the least, the ordinary, to get things done.

*The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. Could it come to you too? I think so. There are prophets among us, you know. But no need to go looking for camel's hair attire at Burlington's or Marshall's or wherever you tend to shop. Don't bother looking for jars of locusts and honey at Trader Joe's either. You won't need those things. Simply wear the Light that shines through the darkness and within you and allow that same Light to guide your feet.*

May we join our voices with John so that we can boldly proclaim, "*Prepare the way of the Lord!*"

Amen!

\*Anthem taken from "The Burial of the Dead: Rite Two", The Book of Common Prayer, page 491

\*\* "Gnaw on This: Second Sunday in Advent," The Rev. Mike Kinman, December 5, 2018