



“A Right-Side-Up World”
Scripture – Luke 3:1-6
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, December 9, 2018

“Prepare the way of the Lord!” Every year, on the second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist emerges from the wilderness to repeat this enduring refrain.

And, every year, it seems like such a timely message for this point in the season. Because that’s all we are doing these days ... Preparing. We are preparing shopping lists to ensure we have presents for Secret Santas, and stamps to send out those stacks of Christmas cards, and enough butter to bake three batches of the kids’ favorite cookies. We are wrapping gifts to place beneath the tree or to bring to church or to mail to grandchildren scattered across the country. We are unpacking nativity sets and nutcrackers and altering the very landscapes of our homes, as we bring evergreens indoors and string up lights outside. We are preparing to welcome the Lord into our world and to bask in the light of his glory for a handful of long winter nights. And then — when the carols fall silent and the Christmas Trees become fire hazards — we will kick the dried-out balsams to the curb and put our homes and lives back in order. Until next year, when John the Baptist’s refrain will echo from the wilderness and we will busy ourselves with preparations once again.

But when we really listen for the prophet’s voice, we realize there is so much more to preparing a highway for our God.

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

All four gospel writers associate this quote from Isaiah with the ministry of John the Baptist. For he is the one sent to ready the world for the coming Messiah. As John’s father prophesies when his son is just eight days old, John “will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to the people by the forgiveness of their sins, to herald the One who will guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:76-79). So John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, calling all who gather at the Jordan to change their hearts so they might be ready to welcome the One who comes to transform the world. “Prepare the way of the Lord,” John says.

But Luke alone among the Gospel writers recalls Isaiah’s description of a world-made-ready:

“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.”

Now — to our ears — it sounds like John the Baptist is calling us to grab our hardhats and pile into bulldozers so that we can level creation. But why would we do that? Why on earth would we want the Grand Canyon filled in or the towering Tetons brought low, just so we could put in a highway for our God? Is this really what a world-made-ready to receive the Lord looks like?

But — to the community who originally heard these words — this vision of earth-shaking transformation was radically good news. Through the prophet Isaiah, God was calling to a people in exile, telling them to leave their captors behind and head home. Even though their journey would take them through the desert, the way would *not* be treacherous because the valleys had been filled and the mountains humbled and the crooked paths made straight. And the presence of the Lord would be with them, for all the world to see.

Five hundred years after the Jewish people returned from Babylon, these words ring out again in the Judean wilderness as John the Baptist prepares the way of the Lord. Like Isaiah, John proclaims a vision of earth-shaking transformation, for the Messiah who is coming after him will do nothing less than turn the world right-side up:

As Mary sings after the angel foretells Christ’s birth, the child she carries in her womb will lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things.

As the righteous Simeon declares upon meeting the newborn Messiah, the child he holds in his arms will cause the mighty to fall, and the meek to rise.

As Jesus, himself, announces from a pulpit in Nazareth, the Spirit of the Lord has anointed him to bring good news to the poor and proclaim release to the captives ... to declare the year of the Lord’s favor.

And, throughout his ministry, Jesus radically re-orders the world: He quiets howling winds and smooths churning seas so that a boat-full of fearful followers can cross safely to the other side. He inspires Jericho’s chief tax collector to give up crooked dealings and return money to the people he has exploited. He preaches that the kingdom of God belongs to children, and teaches that the first will be last, and offers forgiveness to sinners. And, finally, he turns a cross into a symbol of reconciliation and a graveyard into a site of resurrection. And through the love and grace this Messiah brings, the whole world tastes God’s promised peace.

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When the Lord comes among us, the world shifts. Paths open in the desert, ushering captive peoples out of bondage. Light shines on those who sit in darkness, to guide all feet into the way of peace. The lowly are exalted. Crooked ways are made straight. And all flesh sees the salvation of God.

John — the prophet of the Most High who prepares the way of the Lord — knows that such earth-shaking transformation inspires, even demands transformation. So he goes before the Messiah to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He calls the crowds who gather at the Jordan to change their hearts and minds — to abandon crooked ways, and seek out paths that lead to peace — by clothing the naked and sharing

their bread with the hungry. John assures these crowds that such a transformation leads to forgiveness, or — to render the Greek word differently — leads to *release*. Release from the sins that bind them, so that they are freed to live a life in service to God. Release from systems that oppress, so that — when the Lord comes — they are freed to be part of righting the world.

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Friends — this voice still cries out, calling us to prepare the way of Lord. For — even now — too many sit in darkness waiting for the dawn from on high to break upon us; too many dwell in the shadow of death, longing for the one who will guide our feet in the way of peace. And, in a world that can feel crooked or chaotic or downright cruel, we all hope for the One who promises to transform creation.

As we purchase gifts and bake cookies and ready our homes to celebrate Christ’s birth, the prophet’s voice cries out from the pages of Scripture — proclaiming a vision of earth-shaking transformation, calling us to turn our hearts and minds toward the One who comes, urging us to commit ourselves to preparations that *not* only alter the landscapes of our homes but that help to right the world.

But how? How might we turn this world right-side up? We cannot single-handedly flatten mountains or raise up valleys. That’s a task for a Messiah.

But — like John the Baptist — we can go before the Lord to prepare God’s ways. We can point others to the One who comes and to the forgiveness, healing, and wholeness Christ brings. We can imagine a world in which all creation enjoys God’s promised peace, and commit ourselves to realizing this vision.

To see what this looks like, we need only look to the prophets of our day: to the artists and poets, the children and youth.

I hope you took notice of the Peace Art Exhibition displayed in the hallway outside the Sanctuary. *Pacem in Terris* — an interfaith organization that works to promote peace in our city and beyond — invited the children and youth of Wilmington to imagine the world they want to live in. The images you see lining the hallway are visual representations of this world.

There is a painting of a bookshelf, in which each of the multi-colored books upon the shelves bears the flag of one of the world’s nations. “My vision of peace is one in which countries all over the world can come together despite cultural, political, and economical differences,” says the eleventh grader who created this piece.¹

Another depicts a mother kissing her baby against a beautiful backdrop of orange and red and blue watercolors. The Artist explains: “In my mind, peace and unity go hand in hand. Being together and acting as one creates a beautiful, tranquil world. When the strong lift the weak, they create more potential for both of them — surrounding themselves with warmth, despite possibly cold and harsh surroundings.”²

And, then, there’s my favorite: It’s a young girl’s depiction of a world in which peace reigns. It’s a simple picture — just a chain of rotund stick-figures standing against a friendly, yellow background, with the artist’s name looming large overhead. And beneath the picture are simple, prophetic words: “If you hold hands, you can’t fight.”³

¹ Meredith Rush, Concord High School

² Kristin Haroldsdottir, Mount Pleasant High School

³ Makaela, “Summer in the Parks.”

This art exhibition captures more than the far-fetched dreams of idealistic youth. It represents their collective vision of a world turned right-side up — a world in which all people walk in the way of peace, and all flesh sees the salvation of God. These prophetic images — of nations coming together despite differences, of a mother embracing her baby, of children holding hands against a yellow sky — help us envision a world in which the Lord dwells among us. Yes, in some ways this exhibition imagines the impossible — a global landscape that could only come into being through an earth-shaking transformation. Yet, at the same time, this world is so close at hand — made real every time the strong lift the weak or hands reach out in love.

As we await the Messiah who comes to transform creation, we can all be part of shaping this world in our midst. By turning our hearts and minds toward the One who sets us free to live lives of faithful service, by seeking out paths that lead to peace ... Until all flesh sees the salvation of God.

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May it be so.

Prayers of the People – Gregory Knox Jones

The Sunday prior to Thanksgiving, everyone who was in worship wrote on gratitude cards the things for which they were grateful. Two Sundays ago we used many of these for the Prayers of the People, and today we use many more.

Creator of the Cosmos, when we ponder the countless blessings of our lives, we cannot help but express our appreciation for all that brings us joy, meaning and happiness. We give thanks for the elegance of the earth – for water and wildlife, for music and art, and for sunrises that make you stop, gasp and give thanks for beauty and wonder.

Loving God, we express our gratitude for our parents, husbands, wives, and partners, beautiful children and grandchildren, special friends, and sharing time with Mom. We count as a true blessing being raised in a strong and stable family that provides the support and tools we need to begin our adult life.

Eternal God, we are grateful for plenty of food on the table, good health and successful recovery from cancer, a warm home, school, a job, strong and positive people in our lives, the compassion of long-term caregivers, and the countless opportunities that come our way.

Gracious God, we give thanks for the joy we find in our church family, our excellent church staff, our music ministry and pastoral ministry, the faith formation of our children, opportunities to help people in need, peace and justice work in our community and in Israel/Palestine, and for the light of the church that often shines in darkness.

We are grateful for having *enough* – not excess – but ample, and for knowing folks in very different circumstances well enough to see our common humanity.

Everlasting God, we appreciate retirement homes and good hospital care, airplanes and opportunities to travel, dogs and cats, books and phones, video games and jump shots.

We are grateful for freedom, and in spite of all our country's flaws, a prevailing sense of justice and fairness. We pray for peace and for ever-deepening connections among people, all natural life, the universe, and especially with you.

We give thanks for the gift of a newborn, new life and the joy of witnessing wonder and growth everyday; for hope in difficult times, for redemption, and for birth pangs, for Jesus and the gift of salvation, for acts of kindness and generosity, for the hope we have that we cling to and that clings to us – your never failing grace.

Loving God, we are grateful for the gift of each new day, your steadfast presence, and your faithful guidance. Now, hear us as we join our voices together in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, **“Our Father...”**