

From the pulpit of North Shore Congregational Church

“A Song and A Promise”

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Luke 1:68–79 Luke 3:1-6

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Both of our readings this morning come from the beginning of Luke’s gospel. In our first reading we hear from Zechariah who has been visited by the angel Gabriel and told that he will have a son who will prepare the people for the coming Lord. In Zechariah’s song of praise to God he will also speak to his newborn child who will become John the Baptist.

Luke 1:68-79

⁶⁸“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

In our second reading we jump forward to when John is now an adult, a prophet speaking in the wilderness. These verses contain a list of hard to pronounce names, which could seem like TMI (too much information) but bear with me as the author notes these with intention and purpose...

Luke 3:1-6

³In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of 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. ⁵Every 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; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

A Song and a Promise

We have begun this morning with words from numerous prophets. First as the Penno's gave voice to the prophet Malachi during the Advent Candle lighting, Maribeth's children's sermon talks about John, and then of course both of our readings, beginning with a father's song of praise and purpose! A song that sings of God's salvation about to "break upon us" It is Zechariah's song, the father of a child he thought would not, could not, be born to he and his wife Elizabeth. And now Zechariah speaks of this child as one who will prepare the way for the coming Lord, the ONE that the world will be changed by. And next we heard of this child of Zechariah and Elizabeth, now grown and living out his role to speak of God's salvation, quoting from the prophet Isaiah saying prepare, get ready!

So yes we riddled with prophets and it is good to remember, and honor, and try to understand how *all* of scripture, including that which we call the Old Testament, is the basis and continuation of God's creative and merciful presence; a presence that we both believe and anticipate as fulfilled in a helpless child who grows into this person called Jesus and is ultimately understood as Christ, the Messiah!

Sandwiched between our first reading of Zechariah's song and our second reading of John the Baptist is the beautiful way Luke tells the story of the birth of Jesus, but of course that is for another day. And there is a reason why we wait and instead hear from the prophets on the second Sunday in Advent.

There are some important things to consider about prophets and prophesy. We may picture prophets as these edgy people living on the fringe, a bit wild haired, and shouting at the world, predicting the future. But the many prophets of the Bible are not soothsayers, reading tea leaves and turning over cards to predict the future. The prophet's role was deeply rooted in the world in which they lived, reminding and warning, telling it like it is, but also raising up God's eternal promise.

John the Baptist speaks of preparation as *our* role, and that repentance, or turning and change is where we will meet this surprising, unexpected yet long awaited God in Jesus. ...and that change of heart and mind is in our response to this promise.

Of course by this I do not mean that what we do can somehow earn us the right to have this gift. Our response is not like checking off a to do list of good deeds or like opening a window each day on an Advent calendar until we finally get to open the one with the baby Jesus pictured inside. This is not the core of the promise of salvation. But- we do play a part in this Advent waiting and preparing, for the gift that was given in creation is the gift to choose.

And so Advent is about waiting and in a sense practicing patience and hope. Maribeth gave my daughter a quote about patience during a time when Margaret's (and all of ours) patience was stretched, as we waited for answers that didn't seem to come. It says to change your heart because, "Patience is waiting. Not passively waiting. That is laziness. But to keep going when the going is hard and slow – that is patience." John the Baptist speaks of this type of patience that is open to change as he calls out to prepare, when he speaks again the promise that things crooked shall be made straight, rough ways will be smoothed, and that God's salvation will be seen by all.

The prophets warning or call to repent is also a promise, it is a call to choose to keep going, to choose to keep believing, to choose to keep loving, to choose hope, to live peace. Because, when it comes right down to it, the promise of salvation has already given.

I love how Luke wraps the Gospel in details of time and place. Remember I told you earlier there is a reason for the list of hard to pronounce names and place. John's birth is "in the days of King Herod of Judah" just as Jesus' birth is while the Emperor Augustus rules and Quirinius is governor. And now as John begins his preaching and baptizing career it is the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius ... followed by that list of other political and religious leaders of the time. Luke does this to highlight that the beginning of the Christian story sits in this ongoing history of God's world. And while all of the named rulers of the day have come and gone, the story that begins with a homeless insignificant child changes us all.

Let's locate ourselves in God's story. So here we are, in the fifteenth year of the twenty first century, the second Sunday of Advent. And we are hearing the promises of prophets but also the uncomfortable call to change. What do you see in yourself that needs affirming or changing, what do you see in yourself that raises up God's promise? What do we already know? Last week Marty spoke of our surprising God but we also know that God has chosen surprising people to work through, a couple who had little hope for child, a wandering preacher and baptizer, an unwed teenage girl, all chosen to prepare the way, all choosing to trust in God.

Well God is not done with us yet! God chooses each of us as well, the teachers, coaches, doctors, parents, accountant, student, lawyers, and nurses, overemployed and underemployed, even this middle aged preacher... What songs and promise do we offer up and receive?

The reminder of these songs and promises are especially needed as we live in the shadows of daily news, daily cares and worries. Especially during Advent for as someone said we can be swamped by the festivities and fatigue...and yet we relish the glimmer of lights that remind us of God's light...we speak of the concept of peace that we wish each other echoing the Angels saying, "Glory to God and peace on earth."

We choose to look toward the light, we celebrate with traditions and rituals the lighting of the Advent wreath, the decorating of our homes and sanctuary, which does not mean we ignore or turn away from the needs of the world, or the ways that traditions can sometimes make us pause with a sense of loss and grief...but we turn away from hopelessness. We choose to hear the prophets again, even if we cringe at the sound of dire warnings or the call to “repent” the voice that asks us to allow ourselves to be changed. And this is because, as we know, forgiveness is at the core of this Christmas story, it is what we ask for and offer to each other as we pray the Lord’s Prayer. It is what we rely on when approach the Lord’s Table with confession, assurance, praise and shared communion.

In closing and as we first sing and then come to the Lord’s Table, I offer another quote from author Barbara Kingsolver who writes, “The very least you can do in your life is figure out what [and I would add who] you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof.”

My prayer for you, for all, is that we deepen our hope during this Advent season, that we open ourselves to the unexpected ways of God and offer our hearts to be moved toward the way of salvation, mercy, and forgiveness, and to give light to those who live in darkness.

Amen

Let’s stand together and sing hymn # 88 Canticle of the Turning