

6 December 2015 (Second Sunday of Advent)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Signs of Warning”
Luke 3:1-6

“What are you waiting for?” We ask that question when we are impatient. We don’t like to wait. In fact, we sort of resent it. If we get behind a line of cars at the drive-through, “fast food” clearly is no longer fast, or at least not fast enough. And then if our burger and fries aren’t quite ready and we have to drive forward into that little waiting spot—come on! Our expectations are geared to getting what we want, when we want it, and we want it now. At our most pious, we might say, “Oh, I don’t mind waiting in line. I use that time to pray.” I can’t tell you how much I admire people who say that. I am not one of them. I don’t pray when I am waiting. If I haven’t brought something to read, I have a hard time not believing that waiting time is wasted time. It stands between me and where I want to be. It’s like the interim period in a church’s life—in fact, some members of churches intentionally pull back and stay away from church until they know what the “new guy” is going to be like. Periods of waiting are certainly the most challenging for people because they feel like periods of inaction. Nothing is going on. Or is there? Could God be using the waiting periods in our lives to teach us something? God is present during all the periods of our life. Could times of waiting offer special insights from God?

Into a world impatient for God to act against oppression and to fulfill the covenant established with Abraham, John the baptizer leapt onto the scene like a wild man. He wasn’t wild in the sense of being reckless or impulsive. He was wild in the sense that he proclaimed the unvarnished truth about the relationship between God and ourselves. As God’s mouthpiece, he had a mission to fulfill, a mission set forth by the prophet Isaiah, as quoted by Luke in today’s Gospel text. That mission was to prepare the way for the Lord’s arrival so that everyone would be able to see it and not miss it, and there would be no obstacles standing in the way. If it meant serious earth moving, leveling mountains, or rerouting roads—whatever it might take to give the children of God a clear view of God’s next great act, then that is the preparation the messenger was called to accomplish.

John burst on the scene during a time of waiting, frustration, and impatience in Judaea. Judaea was an occupied province of the Roman Empire. Its life as the sacred company of God’s people was a far cry from the design set forth in the Law of Moses. It was not surprising, therefore, that many people advocated establishing independence by force. How long were God’s people supposed to wait? Might God be calling them to take matters into their own hands, and to challenge their Roman occupiers? Why couldn’t God give them a military victory as happened under Joshua at Jericho? Who knows, they might just succeed, or at least they should die trying. Others felt that a direct challenge of Rome wasn’t the right course of action, and that God’s people would realize their redemption through nonviolent means. But everyone was anxious and on edge. They were tired of paying taxes to Rome, tired of living under the constant restrictive rule and judgment of religious authorities, and tired of waiting. Maybe God was absent. Or

worse yet, maybe God had forgotten, and the promise made to Abraham would die unfulfilled as a distant memory.

But the people had not counted on John, son of Zechariah. Ever conscientious about documentation, Luke leaves no stone unturned in placing John in historical context: the Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate the governor, and three different tetrarchs or rulers—Herod, Philip, and Lysanias—are on the Roman side. High priests Annas and Caiaphas ground John on the Jewish side. Luke wants his readers to realize that God called John in chronological time, as an act of history. But Luke also wants his readers to understand that God called John in prophetic time, in what is termed in the Greek language as *kairos*: opportune time, the right time, the fullness of time. That is why Luke takes pains to quote the prophet Isaiah, in order to place Zechariah's son, John, in the context of God's plan to fulfill the promise of salvation. It was time for a plainspoken man to cut through people's despair and impatience with a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

But this message was more than just an announcement, more than just getting people's attention and asking them to listen. The message and mission God gave John were specially tailored to a waiting people who had given up watching. The people of God now needed a warning. Repentance—turning one's heart toward God—was crucial if the people of God were going to be facing the right direction to see the day of God's salvation. Repentance and forgiveness lay at the heart of Isaiah's prophecy, which John had come to fulfill. It was a dramatic moment for the people of Judaea. How would they respond?

This past week the horrible events in San Bernardino have once again, as a depressingly repetitive narrative of other recent violent acts, reminded us that we are living in a season of waiting and expectation, of impatience and anxiety. Like the people of Judaea, who often bore the brunt of random violence and death, today's world population also experiences random violence and death, and in particularly organized and sinister ways. Is God speaking to us during this season of violence? What is God saying? What is God preparing, and what are we waiting for? Perhaps the warning God issued through Zechariah's son, John, who arrived on the scene in the fullness of time and in historical time to recalibrate the hearts of people to receive God's salvation anew, applies to us still. Perhaps God is still calling us to depend upon our baptism as though it were the only thing in the world worth depending on. If we were to live that way, completely beyond fear and anxiety, what would we do differently? To put it another way, if courage and money were no object, if our hearts felt fully forgiven and free of all spiritual burdens, what might we be able to see with clear vision that the circumstances of our lives blind us to now? Our particular oppressor is not an occupying power, the way Rome occupied Judaea two thousand years ago. Our oppressor is of a different sort. Our oppressor is a mindset of wariness and suspicion that stifles love and feeds people's worst fears. Oppressors tend to bring out the worst in people, and ours is certainly doing that to us politically and socially. John's message of repentance and forgiveness directly counters that oppressor. How will we respond? What are we waiting for?

It may seem odd to think of John's wild, unvarnished proclamation as a message of joy, but as a warning against letting the oppressor win, it is indeed a message of joy and of hope. It is always tempting to give in to despair, and John won't let us off that easy. I think that is what the prophet Malachi had in mind when he foresaw this proclamation as a refiner's fire. Repentance and forgiveness always jolt us out of feeling sorry for ourselves, sorry for all the suffering people in the world, and sorry that God isn't reaching down to fix our problems. John's message warns us against falling into that trap of fear and self-pity, and challenges us to turn a different direction so that we can see how God might use us in times of darkness to redeem the world's suffering. In the letter he wrote to the Philippians from prison, the Apostle Paul defied the darkness surrounding him by telling his audience that he was praying for them with joy, confident that the one who began a good work among them would bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. All that mattered to Paul during those days of uncertainty and danger in his life was that other believers be fruitful and overflowing in love and faith. What oppressor can beat that?

In her devotional for this second Sunday of Advent, Rachel Srubas enjoins us to "rejoice already." As John warned people against letting their spiritual burdens drag them down and miss the Lord's glorious arrival, Paul refused to let prison dictate his heart. And so today's Advent devotional acknowledges that maybe it's zero outside or seven below, or maybe "the sun is shining brightly where you live, but your soul is iced over with a year's worth of terror: the shootings we're losing count of, the wars and rumors of wars." Don't let the oppressor win. Be warned: it may get ugly for a while, but no power, not even our own despair, can resist God's salvation. Today's Advent devotional concludes,

Get the ice scraper, honey.
Bake some genuine cookies from scratch
(or from a tube; that'll do).
Do what you must do to jump-start your joy,
Because somebody out there—and it's not
Jesus—
is banking on your despair.
Put that terrorist devil on ice
And let joy be your defiant prayer.

This day, and every day of Advent preparation, let repentance and forgiveness rule that we may receive God's salvation with glad and joyful hearts.



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