

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL**  
**December 6, 2015**  
**Sermon by Rev. Gloria G. Hopewell, D.Min**  
**Text – Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 3: 1-6**

“There’s a voice in the wilderness crying,” we will sing in a bit. Can you hear it? Whose voice do you hear? Is that voice just talking to the wall? Is anyone listening? Is it even possible to hear in the noisy and distracted world we live in this Advent?

We hear the passage in today’s Gospel about John the Baptist and his proclaiming the arrival of God in Christ. It is, in part, a quotation from the prophet Isaiah several centuries earlier.

Isaiah was speaking hope to those in exile – that they had repented from turning away from their God, their sins were forgiven, and God would allow them return to Jerusalem.

As the Christian story emerged from Jesus’ earthly ministry, prophecies like this were seen to have more far-reaching meaning than a one-time return from exile. They came to be understood by those who followed Jesus as pointing toward the promised Messiah. John the Baptist, then, was the continuation of the Old Testament prophets, the one who would announce that Messiah.

For Isaiah, it was God who would fill every valley, making every mountain and hill low, straighten the crooked paths and smooth the rough ways in order to ease the journey for his forgiven people. For John, it was the people who would prepare the way of the Lord through repentance and returning to God.

Why does this matter? Well, I find that it clarifies a bit the muddle of what Advent is all about. What it is that we are preparing for, waiting for, anticipating? John the Baptist announced the coming of Christ – that happened. Jesus lived among the people, in this world, showing them how to come closer to God, inaugurating God’s Kingdom. Then he promised to return, to fulfill the Kingdom. That is what we await in Advent, Jesus coming again to finish the return of God’s people to their God – along, of course, with preparing for celebrating the miracle of the Incarnation.

The latter is easier, isn’t it. Making our homes ready for that celebration with special decorations and foods, gatherings of family and friends, the familiar liturgies of Advent and then Christmas. All of these are wonderful and important traditions because they make Jesus’ birth present to us again and again. They keep the story alive and available to each new generation.

There is another task, though, for people of faith. Over and over and over again, people have turned away from God, some altogether, some taking wrong turns and getting off-track. We see this all around us – in our country, our cities, our world – the violence, hatred, evil. We pray. We wring our hands. We weep and mourn. What else can we do? It gets so

big and pervasive, so overwhelming that hope sometimes feels like it is slipping through our fingers. That God has forgotten us – or given up on us.

John Westerhoff, Episcopal priest, scholar, and writer reminds us that Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done” and then act “as if” the kingdom has arrived by cooperating with God. Our preparation is more than getting ready for God to do something (like straightening the crooked paths). It is we who are to do that. Oh, we can’t do it alone, but God will not do it without us.

We pray, of course. And there are times when we truly cannot do anything about a situation, times when we do just need to give something over to God. Other times, though, there are things we can do. Think about the prayers. We can’t, perhaps, cure a disease or change a politician’s mind through prayer. We may be able to ease the suffering of the sick. We can have some impact on unjust practices that harm some, we can repent of ways that we are complicit in maintaining inequities. And we can revise our understanding of repentance. It is more than apologizing, saying “I’m sorry” and going back to business as usual. It requires that we admit that all is not fine as it is and be willing to change course, turn around.

Advent is the time for this. It is not so much a penitential time as it is a reflective time to sense God breaking through and offering new chances to turn toward God. It is a time to imagine possibilities for a new world that point more directly toward God’s vision for us. All of us. It is a time to ponder all that God has done and all that can happen as we cooperate with God.

What would our world be like if all started out with opportunities rather than some getting paths of rocks and ruts and turns while others get super highways? What if there were more level places and fewer deep pits and exalted high places?

Advent is also a time of hope. Not hope in the sense of “wishing for.” But hope in connection with faith. Trust in God’s loving goodness and desire for all to thrive. Assurance that God will welcome our cooperation and give us strength and courage that we may not imagine.

There’s a voice in the wilderness crying. Can you hear it? Maybe you’ll need to get away from your busy preparations for a time. Go to the “desert.” “Good news comes in the desert, because the desert is the only place you can hear it.”

Amen