

“Guide Us in the Way of Peace”
Advent II, December 5, 2021
Scripture: Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6

Of all the gospels only Luke gives us some insight into the lives of people around Jesus. We learn there not just about his origin but also about John the Baptist’s who Luke portrays as a distant cousin of Jesus. We even learn a little about John’s father, Zechariah and mother Elizabeth. Luke’s gospel opens with Zechariah, an old priest, taking his turn in the temple and entering the Holy of Holies for prayer. He had done this many times before, I’m sure, whenever his turn rolled around, but this time was different. There’s an old story that says whenever a priest entered the inner sanctum of the temple, a rope was tied to his ankle, a tether to be used to pull him out if he were overwhelmed. We’re not told if that happened to Zechariah but his experience there was unique.

Zechariah had a vision of an angel telling him his wife, who was also very old, would bear him a son and he was to name that son John. When the old priest understandably questioned that information, he was struck dumb until his child was born and named. These words are his first after John is born; a beautiful song of blessing, extolling God’s goodness and looking forward to the role his son would play in the world’s redemption.

In these first two chapters of the gospel Luke uses three songs like this to foreshadow what’s to follow and to connect Jesus’ life to the whole history of Israel, the long saga of God’s effort to establish a people rooted in justice and compassion. Zechariah’s song follows Mary’s, which is more famous, and then we hear after Jesus is born from an old man named Simeon who spends his time praying in the temple and waiting for a sign of redemption. All these songs are meant to give us a sense of the significance of Jesus’ story as it unfolds. But only Zechariah’s gives us this personal address, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.”

John is a special character in the gospels. He precedes Jesus, announcing his arrival, but he also calls the people to renew their commitment to the God of Torah, the God of compassion and justice. Every gospel tells us about him and his ministry. There’s some evidence that even after Jesus’ resurrection and the movement of the early church, there were pockets of John’s followers still waiting, still pursuing the path he started them on. Many scholars are convinced that Jesus was a disciple of John before beginning his own ministry.

John was concerned with preparing the way for God. He identified with Isaiah’s description of “one crying in the wilderness” to make a straight highway for God. When Luke describes John’s entrance, he’s very careful to place the events around his life within a certain context. There is an emperor, a governor, rulers and high priests, the most powerful people of that time, people who seemed to hold the world’s destiny in their hands. Yet God’s word doesn’t

come to any of them. It isn't spoken in the halls of governments or palaces or temples; it's spoken in the wilderness, to a nobody in the middle of nowhere.

John calls the people away from the centers of power, away from participating in a system that is beating them down, and repent, to turn around and change course. The forgiveness Zechariah mentions in his song is the promise John offers them. God's forgiveness is certain and all they have to do is turn around and take it. All they have to do is stop cooperating with the powers all around them. We didn't read this part, but John offers the crowds more than abstractions and pious rhetoric. When they ask him what they need to do, he gives them specifics: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Tax collectors are told not to collect more than is legal and soldiers are told not to use extortion through threats or false accusations. There are concrete actions they can all take to straighten their lives, to stop cooperating with the systems they're part of.

John called the people to baptism, to wash themselves in the river of mercy as a way of embodying the new direction they're taking. The Jordan River represents a passage from one life to another. Just as the people first crossed it into the Promised Land to claim a new life, John calls them to revisit their roots and cross over again. It's not about purity and becoming fit to encounter God; it's about acknowledging the new path they're on, starting fresh and leaving the past behind.

That's the most dangerous journey anyone can make. Finding the courage to face the reality of our lives honestly and acknowledge our complicity with unjust systems and leave them behind us is the hardest thing we can do. It means giving up security and status and comfort. All those people who go to the river to meet John aren't looking for easy answers. They're looking for wholeness, for a sense of peace in their lives. But peace can only come when we've let go of those things that keep us stuck in cruel and unjust systems.

The final words of Zechariah's song say it all: "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." When we respond to John's call to repent, to turn away from the systems that keep us in darkness whether they are social or economic, political or religious, we move onto a new path that leads to peace. Peace in the Bible is more than just an absence of conflict—just because people aren't openly fighting doesn't mean they're at peace. Peace in the Bible, the Hebrew word *shalom*, means wholeness and integrity. It's that place where our actions are aligned with our values, where everything we do is an expression of our deepest commitments.

So, if we are committed to bringing an end to systemic poverty in our community, then the actions that lead to peace will be on behalf of those living in poverty. If we are committed to ending structural racism in our country, then the actions that lead to peace will confront racism head on and seek ways to make reparations, so we can begin leaving the past behind. These are the ways we make paths straight, filled the valleys and smooth the rough places. It's how we become open to what God is offering us, to be guided into the way of peace.

As we make our way through the season of Advent toward the birth of Christ, we need to look on what we're doing as not just confined to these few weeks in the last month of the year. We're not practicing some hollow ritual. What we're doing is meant to be a microcosm of our whole lives. The prayers we say, the songs we sing, the stories we read are all meant to shape us anew and remind us of our true calling. We are God's own people, called to live with compassion and generosity in a world that clings to violence and greed. We're called to reveal God's way of salvation through truth and reconciliation, acts of generosity and justice all year round. And with every step be guided into the way of peace.

Amen