

**Sermon “Catching Our Breath”**  
**Kirk of St James**  
**Sunday December 8, 2024**  
**Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton**

In our modern world talk about preparing straight paths, filling valleys and lowering mountains is a vastly different idea than it would have been for John the Baptist. We have the capacity for better or for worse to clear cut land, to pave roads, to raise up bridges, and even build tunnels through mountains. (Although I would argue that with the number of potholes in our roads our ways are certainly not smooth!) For John, the promised Messiah is not doing these things because they are worried about people getting to their destinations with maximum efficiency, at least not physically. The promised Messiah is coming to help people find God in a new way.

This passage begins with every Sunday morning scripture readers worst nightmare—a list of rulers and places with challenging names. While we might dread having to read them aloud the gospel of Luke does this for a specific reason—Luke is anchoring his gospel and the story of the Messiah in a very real time and place in history. This story is happening during a precise time in our human history. While important messages in our world tend to come through those in power, this message arrives in an unusual way, to desert dweller John the Baptist. “In Luke, the word of God comes neither to the emperor nor to the governors, and not even to the high priests. It comes to simple John, son of Zechariah, whom Luke introduces in the first chapter of his Good News. John the Baptist is to us a great prophet who prepared the way for Jesus but compared with the political and religious leaders of his day, he was just an ordinary guy—and yet, God chose John, and not the luminaries of his time to be the messenger. God sent the

message to John not in Rome, not in Jerusalem, but out in the wilderness. Not the seat of political or religious power, but the wilderness, the often scary and confusing place where God had spoken to God's people in the past and through which God had led God's people to a new and promised life."

John would not have been an obvious choice for prophet. Living in the wilderness, away from the world, he lived an ascetic lifestyle. In fact, there was a community known as the Essenes who lived in Qumran, and it has been speculated that John likely trained with them, or at the very least knew of them and their practices. They were ascetics who shunned marriage, refrained from attending worship in the temple, and the study of scripture was of utmost importance. In fact, one of the most important modern biblical discoveries was of the Dead Sea Scrolls, in the caves of Qumran where the Essenes were based. At the time John was a preacher who never fully left the wilderness keeping to the area around the Jordan River, so his sphere of influence was certainly not large. However, in the end his preaching and his message became so well known he was eventually put to death for his criticism of Herod Antipas marrying Herodias.

While we hear about John the Baptist proclaiming the message of the one who is coming, it is easy to miss the sense of urgency that accompanied it. Biblical scholar N.T Wright likens it to weather alerts. Imminent danger requires urgent action. For example, when we hear we are in a place under threat from something like flood, fire or a tornado we take immediate action. We might evacuate, find refuge, or take other actions to protect ourselves. Another writer said to think about it as if you were hosting a dinner party. Things we might ignore or not deal with are suddenly looked at with fresh perspective. The pile of clean clothes waiting to be folded are

tossed into a closet out of sight, the dust bunnies drifting down the hallway are vacuumed. We put a great deal of work into making sure things are in order. If we do these things for planned company, how would the imminent arrival of the Messiah change our sense of urgency?

While lectionary readings change every year, John the Baptist is always included in the season of advent. He acts as a reminder of what the season is truly about. If you are anything like our household the final descent toward Christmas becomes frenzied, as we rush to get ourselves organized and around to all the activities that require our time. My lists are constantly being updated but not getting any shorter. Lights are up, trees put in their stands, and countless other tasks are addressed however, Johns voice cuts through this chaos, asking us to consider things in a different way. We are called and challenged to examine our lives, our values and our priorities. If John were here, he would ask us what we are doing to prepare our hearts for the arrival of Jesus Christ.

That is a much more challenging task than finishing Christmas shopping. I admit, I find it incredibly difficult to practice. I get swept up in the things I want to do or think I should do, and I forget Mary making an impossible journey while 9 months pregnant. I make sure our lights are perfectly spaced on the tree, and try not to burn my baking, but I do not truly consider what this trip sets in motion for humankind. Questions like “why does it matter that Jesus was born in a manger and not a palace?” “What does it mean that the promised Messiah has finally arrived?” It is difficult to stand in a fast-flowing stream and not find yourself drifting downriver with the current, it is easier just to float along with it rather than fight it. With the busyness, the pace, the lists, and the to-dos, this season becomes a raging river, which can feel like it is pulling us under

the weight of all we “have” to accomplish. I believe John might say something like “then take a minute to step out of the river and catch your breath.”

That is what the season of advent is truly meant to be, a gift of time as we anticipate one of the most important moments in human history. During these weeks we celebrate four gifts that are vastly different than the ones we exchange Christmas morning. This week we have been given the gift of peace, what are going to do with it? As a church we call this giving Sunday, when we look to the needs of the community and seek ways we might help and support others this time of year. Gift cards, hot water bottles, money toward the Salvation army helping hampers. It is a way we offer peace back into the community. What are other ways we can offer peace, within our homes and our world? What things do we need help within our own lives in order that we might have peace? Are there things we are doing in our lives that need repentance and change? Prepare, John tells us. Prepare not just to be ready, or clever, or thinking ahead. Prepare because in that action, of taking time, of catching your breath, of letting go of what harms, and holding on to what heals, and offering peace to the world and yourself, is like a desert plant feeling rain after months of drought. It is relief and help ushers in joy, hope, and love. This second Sunday of advent allow yourself moments of peace and consider ways you might also offer peace in the world.

## **PREPARE**

### A Blessing for Advent

Strange how one word  
will so hollow you out.  
But this word  
has been in the wilderness  
for months.  
Years.

This word is what remained  
after everything else  
was worn away  
by sand and stone.  
It is what withstood  
the glaring of sun by day,  
the weeping loneliness of  
the moon at night.

Now it comes to you  
racing out of the wild,  
eyes blazing  
and waving its arms,  
its voice ragged with desert  
but piercing and loud  
as it speaks itself  
again, and again:  
Prepare, prepare.

It may feel like  
the word is leveling you,  
emptying you  
as it asks you  
to give up  
what you have known.

It is impolite  
and hardly tame,  
but when it falls  
upon your lips  
you will wonder  
at the sweetness,  
like honey  
that finds its way  
into the hunger  
you had not known  
was there.  
—Jan Richardson