



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
December 8, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Filling the Valleys"

Luke 3:1-6 (NRSV)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, 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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as 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. Every 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, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

"Filling the Valleys"

On Thanksgiving morning before preparations were underway for the meal, I took part in my annual tradition of seeking relief from my extended family by hanging Christmas lights outside on our front porch.

The front of our house is a portico held up by three columns and for the past two years I've wrapped each of the columns with Christmas lights. The hardest part is connecting all the lights together between the columns. To do this, I've found, I need an extra set of hands to keep to

the line tight around one column as I move my ladder down to the next one.

This year, I employed my 9-year-old son to be that extra set of hands. ‘This will be great,’ I thought. ‘In the years following, he will have special memories of helping his dad with the Christmas lights.’

Things didn’t go as planned. He’s almost but not quite tall enough to hold the line tight comfortably at the top of the column. Holding the line required an amount of concentration and effort that he wasn’t willing or able to give that Thanksgiving morning. The line would go slack; on more than one occasion the columns needed to be restrung.

Yes, there was some frustration;
Yes, some raised voices;
 Maybe a tear or so.

As punishment for my frustration and as relief for my son, my mother-in-law joined us outside and took over his job.

He went inside. My mother-in-law and I strung lights all Thursday morning. This actually went quite well, but nonetheless foiled my plan to use the lights as breathing space for all the extended family togetherness.

Memories indeed.

On the following Tuesday, I related this story to the staff, all of whom nodded in recognition at this familiar scene of parental frustration. As I was talking, Gradye sent around a meme to each of our phones as a way to comment on the story. The meme was a t-shirt, with the funny message, “You think you can hurt my feelings? I used to hold the flashlight for my dad.”

It wasn't until I saw Gradye's message that I recognized, 'Oh, this is a thing that happens.' Dads ask their kids for help. Dads get more caught up in the task than in the bond we were trying to form in the first place. Dads yell, 'Keep the flashlight straight.' Or 'Hold the Christmas lights tighter!'

And just like that, I thought I was still young, but no, look:
I've become a middle-age stereotype.

It's funny how that happens. You become something you didn't intend. Sometimes, you find you take on that which you told yourself, you would be different from. It creeps up on you.

What I want to say this morning, is this happens all the time,
In our lives; Even in faith communities.
In small ways; and In big ways.

An example:

The 3rd Chapter of Luke is clear that John the Baptist's message of preparation for Christ comes at a distance from and is the opposite to the ways of Caesar, Pilate, Herod and all other beneficiaries of the empire.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, 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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

The Greek word Luke uses to name Pilate as 'governor,' by the way, is *hegemonia*, the word where we get our term hegemony, meaning domination and control.

And domination might be a good term to describe all the leaders named here:

Caesar, the leader of the empire who would crucify Jesus and persecute his followers; Pilate and Herod, local rulers working on behalf of Rome who would bounce Jesus back and forth before condemning him to death; even the high priests were chosen, not by the Jewish people but by their Roman colonialists.

The NIV is closer to the Greek when it names Herod, Philip, and Lysanias; it calls them ‘tetrarchs,’ not just ‘rulers.’ They were tetrarchs because they had divided the region up into four parts. A tetrarchy is a 4th of a region. In other words, Rome and its local rulers had conquered Judea and divided up the spoils.

In their mind, it was Roman land; it was their land, to do with it as they wished; the Jewish people just happened to live there.

Luke goes out of the way to name these rulers and their regions of control, before saying ‘the word of God’ didn’t come to any of them or their kingdoms but rather to John...in the wilderness, ‘proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.’

Look at all the mighty, the hierarchy, the Empire, Luke tells us, and then...look away, because that’s not where the word of God chooses, freely to come. Not to the ruler but to the subjugated.

Already in Luke God’s word has categorically condemned those who lord power over the lowly. Mary says it best in the first chapter, “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.’

Likewise in his own ministry, John begins with the words of the prophet Isaiah. He quotes Isaiah 40:

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord...Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

In its original proclamation, these verses of Isaiah announced the end of the Babylonian exile. The conquering power of Babylon, who had crushed Judea a generation before is now defeated, says Isaiah - a mountain made low. The people were free to return to their lost homeland, the valley filled. The way of the Lord.

In John's day, as the first verses of our chapter point out, the conquering powers of Rome were still very much at their height; there's no mountain laid low in Roman occupied Judea, and yet, nonetheless, *and curiously*: John still proclaims Isaiah's same message of release and liberation.

What does it mean, for John to say, 'prepare the way of the Lord,' as an occupied person?

To answer that question, we have to look at the life of the savior who follows John. For if anything, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus's ministry is characterized by an unrelenting refusal to acknowledge the powers, the prejudices, and the divisions of his day. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus refuses to abide by the ways of Caesar.

Think of:

- The Good Samaritan
- The story of Zacchaeus
- The prodigal son

Each of these stories is found only in the Gospel of Luke. In each of these stories, Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God does not abide by the logic of us vs. them; the insiders and the outsiders; the powerful dominating the lowly. In every instance, Jesus refuses the logic of

domination and says the kingdom of God welcomes all: the outsider, the outcast, the lowly.

So John's point, when he tells us to 'prepare the way of the Lord,' is that, in Christ those powers of hate and exclusion, domination of the vulnerable, and punching down at the lowly; those powers may seem to rule the day today, but in the end, they will not have the last say; they are not the will or word of God.

'So,' he tells us, 'clear out those ways in your own heart. *Prepare the way of the Lord.*'

John's message of preparation for Christ comes at a distance from and is the opposite to the ways of Caesar, Pilate, Herod and all other beneficiaries of the empire.

And yet only a couple of centuries later after Luke's gospel, a curious thing happened.

Christianity and the church joined forces with the Empire. Constantine made Christianity Rome's official religion. And following that, even after Rome fell, of course, Christianity continued this curious alignment with the dominating power players of its day. Think of the crusades and inquisitions, colonialism and chattel slavery, Jim Crow and the Moral Majority.

Isn't it funny how that happens. You become something you didn't intend. Christianity became Empire Christianity.

And it's not all that hard, to look around, and hear echoes of the ways of Caesar and domination coming from churches and Christians today. Last week, our state attorney general argued in the nation's highest court for the statewide ban of all gender affirming medical care for trans youth, no matter the needs, wishes, instruction or direction of their parents, their

doctors, or their churches – not to mention the particular needs of trans youth themselves in our state.

Also, incidentally in the news that same week, the list of 48 books banned from Knox County school libraries came out, titles that include classics from Toni Morrison, Shel Silverstein, and Kurt Vonnegut among many others. These books deal with complex topics, topics that echo and reverberate in the complex lives of our teenagers, voices that students like my children and yours will not be able to find in their school libraries, not matter the instruction of their teachers, no matter the needs of the students. And as you know, there's many Knox County students, unlike my kids and yours, do not have access to these books anywhere else.

I have said over and over from this pulpit, you and I can disagree respectfully and in good faith about this or that issue. Having such discussions, in a safe place where we can hear one another in difference, I believe, is a privilege we have as a community of faith, where we can gather around Scripture and through the movement of the Spirit, discern how God is calling us as individuals and a community.

The problem here and in this week, is that those conversations and that discernment have been rendered moot, even in faith communities such as ours, by Christians who went to Caesar instead.

But if I'm being honest, it's just *other* Christians, either. It's not just...their problem, where faith and the ways of domination mingle together. If I'm being honest, it's also my problem. It's something I catch myself doing. Perhaps you do the same.

I don't know about you, but I find, even as I seek to separate myself from Empire Christianity, its ways have a way of creeping up in me. Maybe it's just the season. Maybe it's the stress of what is happening in our nation and world. But lately, I find myself more easily frustrated, less patient with disagreement, less trusting of others, less able even to

hear the news these days. I too fall more easily into thinking I'm living in a story of us against them, insiders and outsiders.

Have you found the same, creeping up in you, at the end of this year? It's funny how that happens. You become something you didn't intend.

But then, I remember, that John's message was actually for people like me, and people like you; those of us pulled in two directions, between faith and Empire:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee... the word of God didn't come to them, it wasn't heard in the halls of power or by the logic of domination. It came instead to John...in the wilderness.

And what did he do with it? He told a people living under the domination of Caesar that, *Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain...shall be made low.*

Every week, like John's original audience, you and I are pulled in these two countering directions. The world outside is constantly pulling us, coopting us, using us to further the logic of domination, where the table is built off the backs of those excluded. It profits off our outrage and our division. It picks on those already at the margin and feeds on all our prejudice. And it is everywhere. We don't call it an empire any more but the ways of Caesar are very much alive. They are even inside of us.

And yet every year about this time, you and I, in our devotions, in our quiet moments, and yes, in this place, we also hear that voice: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'

This voice reminds us: that repentance is possible; that grace is true; and that the way of the Lord, Christ's own divine path of equity, justice, and inclusion, is not a fairy tale, it is real.

And so, on this Second Sunday of Advent, let us hear again the voice crying out in the wilderness. And let us echo it with our lives; let us be the people of peace. Amen.