

**Homily: Luke 3:1-6 : Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta, GA
Sunday, December 5, 2021, Advent 2
The Rev. David W. Perkins, Th.D.**

German philosopher Martin Heidegger said: **"It may be that any other salvation than that which comes from where the danger is, is still within the unholy."** [Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper, 1971), p. 118.]

Our text captures it in the location of John, "in the desert/wilderness." The wilderness symbolized for Judaism that which separated them from their native land when in Egypt. The exiles in Babylon saw themselves in a new Egypt, separated from home by a "wilderness," through which they must travel. So, John comes from the place of danger. God came to the exiles in Babylon through the wilderness and invited them to journey toward him into that place of spiritual risk.

"Prepare the way of the Lord." The key note of Advent. Just what does that mean for me? The metaphor means that God journeys toward me. Maybe God comes from the place we don't look, as Jesus was coming to them, the place where the danger lies.

And, does God's arrival depend on my preparation? This text offers a plethora of opposites. I am to make straight God's pathway, but listen! Another highway worker is busy here, too.

"Every valley shall be filled in"

"Every mountain and hill shall be made level"

"The crooked shall be made straight" (same word as in v. 4—*euthia*)

"And the rough places shall be made smooth"

Who is the unnamed filler, leveler, straightener, smoother in those passives? It would make sense to say, "Every valley shall be filled in . . . by God."

Contrast In Times and Spaces

Luke's list of rulers and realms puts us into *chronos*, measurable time. Their locations put us into quantifiable space, geographical territory. We live in that space every day, measurable time. We live in a

world full of noise, noise that requires more exertion in listening to discern God's voice.

Our preoccupation with the last presidential election and all the conflicting voices clamoring for our attention resembles this focus in Luke. However, Luke is giving us a hint that our idolatries are the source of our fears. Those in his day preoccupied with placating Rome or with overthrowing Rome both were focused on the wrong times and places. Could our preoccupation with political figures and personalities have us looking in the wrong direction?

In our personal lives, preoccupation with with the landscape of our lives, house, job, investments, etc. means we are focused in the wrong places. Rather, Luke tells us to look for the ripe moment and to the right place. The poet Roethke put it this way: (Last three lines of "The Pure Fury"). The divine time of Advent intersects our often dreary time line and seasons it with meanings. Where will God show up in the barren landscape of my wilderness?

**I live near the abyss. I hope to stay
Until my eyes look at a brighter sun
As the thick shade of the long night comes on.**

[Theodore Roethke, *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 134.]

The Right Moment and the Right Place

Rather than dreaming about an as yet unrealized better time, the right moment is the present moment of fear, dread, despair, caughtness, the place of danger. At this Advent season, when I become aware of sitting in the darkness, of being lonely, afraid, anxious, frustrated, feeling dis-ease, bored, depressed, proud, egotistical, I am more prepared for God's ripe moment to arise, exactly in those dark places. Those are the moments of my exile, my need for God. Even my awareness has come as gift; I have been awakened by the voice of God, a voice that creates the moment of awareness, the ripe moment.

Where is the right place to go? Judea went out to John in the Jordan Valley, and they had to traverse desert places to get there. Israel had to follow Moses into the desert to get to their land.

In this Advent season, perhaps I can focus on figuring out what is going on my life? I can slow down a bit, turn off the computer and the TV and the music and spend time each day—15 minutes, 30 minutes, an hour— with myself in quiet silence. Something in me is asking for my attention. What AM I feeling anyway? What IS going on in my inner life? I am to sit in my fear, boredom, panic, powerlessness, depression. I am not to flee it. God is calling to me FROM those places and inviting me to move toward them as the crowds did toward John in the wilderness. And, in this text God meets me exactly in THAT place. The place of danger.

". . . the desert--a metaphor for the spiritual desert, the emptiness from which we can begin to contemplate the divine mysteries." [Linda Leonard, *The Call to Create: Celebrating Acts of Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1990), p. 31.]

John calls on us to repent. To do so requires that we meet God in these desert places, because these are the places where our souls remind us that we desperately need God, that our lives are contingent, dependent, meaningless without connection to God and to others. To repent means to let go, to turn to God, to release ourselves into God, to pray that God's saving love would take us wherever it desires, to let go of God and of our efforts to control others.

The Time and Place of Salvation

This text tells me that when I go INTO my wilderness, I will find God moving toward me there. God will be leveling the hills and mountains of pride, of denial of need, of efforts to control God and others to get the love I need on my terms. Can I ask God to level the mountains, to release me from the fear of being spiritually poor and empty and alone? God will be leveling the hills. Speaking devotionally, the places of pride, abuse of power—God seeks to deliver us from those places. Blessed are the meek. Where is there pride/abuse of power in my life?

God will be filling in the valleys. Where is there depression/despair in my life? The places of despair and shame and powerlessness and caughtness--God will be "filling in." That does not mean taking away;

rather, it means pouring in divine love, helping me to understand that I find God's love precisely in those places. In every high or low place, God's loving presence precedes me and awaits me.

God will be straightening the crooked places. Where are those bent places of rage, addiction, and brokenness? Those will be straightened and made smooth by God.

ALL flesh shall see the salvation of God. That's God's intent.

My Invitation to You

God's loving, oncoming presence may well reveal to me that my dreams need to be redreamed, that my expectations need to be examined, that my core values need to be rethought, that my despair and hopelessness needs to be shared with someone I trust. So, Roethke's words come to us again.

**I live near the abyss. I hope to stay
Until my eyes look at a brighter sun
As the thick shade of the long night comes on.**

Let us live near the abyss. Block out time/space to listen for the wilderness places within us, turn to God, and look for God's appearance exactly in those wilderness places. Salvation is not the removal of those places; rather, it is finding God in them and dwelling there with God.

In a short story, Koopman has a wealthy farmer playing chess with the Christ child on Christmas Eve. The Christ child had simply appeared. The farmer is winning, as he always did.. They are conversing

The Christ Child smiled again. "That is what happens in life," he said. Then he looked very earnest. "Often people think they are lost. They think that nothing in the world can help them. And then God looks and says, 'It is time.' And all at once everything looks different. Everything comes into a different light, and all at once you see that all is not lost, but won. Remember this, Dyhema! All is not lost in his eyes. The lowly shall be lifted up – the first shall be last." And then he was gone.

[Geert Koopman, "The Chess Player," *Home for Christmas*. (Plough, 2016). <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/culture/short-stories/christmas-stories/the-chess-player>]