

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason S. Glombicki

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Today's gospel reading has at least two parts – (1) a list of leaders and rulers and (2) the beginning of John the Baptist's teaching. If you're anything like me, I often want to skim past lists of names to get to the good part. A lot of times I cannot contextualize the names and frankly, I often fumble the pronunciation of their names as well. But these three short verses are not ones we want to zoom past. While they certainly give us some historical context to the environment in which John began his ministry, they also make a key theological claim. You see, right at the beginning of the gospel and before Jesus begins his ministry, Luke wants to make clear that the presence of God is going to show up in unexpected places and people. It's not going to be revealed in presidents, governors, or religious people. Rather, the presence of God, will be discovered in seemingly average and ordinary people. *And*, God's reign won't show up in capital cities, economic centers, or places of power. Rather, it'll be revealed in the wilderness. In that often scary and confusing place where God has often spoken to God's people. That in-between place, the place of uncertainty, and the place on the margins. And as we begin our study of Luke over this next year, it's important that we remember this central aspect.

The second part of today's gospel introduced us to John the Baptist's message. Today we'll look at the "what" of the message and next week we'll look at the "how" of the message. What we discovered today is that John the Baptist is all about preparation. He mentioned repentance. He connected his

message to the words of the prophet Isaiah who used the imagery of a ruler coming to visit. Isaiah said that it was time to cut back the brush along the road to straighten the paths for a more direct journey. Isaiah said it was time to fill in the potholes for a smooth ride. It was time to level out the make-shift roads to allow for easier access to God's presence. You see, Isaiah and John are calling for all to participate in helping to bring about the quick, smooth, and full vision of God's presence and love.

Next week, we'll explore how repentance plays a role in preparation. But for this week, we're holding onto the need for preparation. In the Advent season, we are called to attend to and prepare for the presence of Christ in our lives, in our church, and in the world. Historically, the season of Advent was seven weeks, like we celebrate here, and it was a time of self-examination and reflection on how our world has been misaligned from God's priorities. It is the time to notice how we've gained by supporting inequality and oppression. To attend to the relationships that are damaged. To bring an end to hierarchies of status, power, and wealth. Advent is like preparing our home for a large sofa or appliance. We ensure we have the money, we clean the space, and we clear our schedule for the delivery. With these preparations it requires us to be honest with ourselves – do we have money for that purchase, do we have enough space, and do we have enough time to prepare? Like preparing for a new delivery, the act of self-examination helps us to determine what is important and how we might participate in bringing about God's vision.

Earlier in this service during Charlie's baptism, we all confessed that there are structures and agents that draw us from God's purposes. We confessed

that we participate in these structures knowingly and unknowingly. We confessed that the ways that we have not shown love, grace, justice, and peace in the world have not pushed us so far away from God that we are stuck on the margins for eternity. Rather, we were reminded in the first part of today's gospel that: In the twenty-fourth year of the twenty-first century, when Joe Biden was President of the United States, and J.B. Pritzker was governor of Illinois, and Brandon Johnson was mayor of Chicago, and Elizabeth Eaton was presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the world of the Lord came to you! For you are called by God to be a part of preparing the world. You are loved by our God who comes into the wilderness and margins to be with you. You are freely given the bread and wine at this table and the water poured out at that font because the word of God has come to you.

And, throughout all of the scriptures God has a tendency to use what we might think of as ineffective people to do God's work. For if God can use a stuttering servant like Moses to free God's people, if God can use a limping Jacob to birth the nation of Israel, and if God can use a nobody like John the Baptist to prepare the way, then God most certainly can use you and me to help prepare the way for God's presence here and now.

Friends, I know this is a busy month filled with preparations for events and holiday gatherings, but today I hope you hear the voice of John the Baptist reminding us to help prepare for God's presence. Look for opportunities to mend relationships as we prepare for Christ. Find occasions to show love and compassion to colleagues and over-worked labors as we prepare for Christ's coming. Remember that you are loved, and that God has come to

you, ordinary you, you on the margins and in the center, Christ is coming for you. Amen.