

Sermon – Luke 3:1-6
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
2 Advent – Year C
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“Out With the Old”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. How is it already the Second Sunday of Advent? As he does this time each year, John the Baptist strides onto the scene with his cry to prepare. I find myself woefully behind. Never mind any possible spiritual unreadiness. I’m just not ready. Most years, we would have had our Christmas tree up and trimmed already. But on Friday, after scanning our calendars for an open time for all five of us to go pick out a tree, we gave up. Instead, two kids and I went to the lot at Rehm yesterday and picked out a tree. I didn’t even have enough money in my wallet, having forgotten that they didn’t take credit cards. But in my own version of a Christmas miracle, they gave me a \$20 discount, tied it to the top of our Volkswagen Jetta, and sent us on our way. We managed to get it into the stand but without Erika at home we didn’t even manage to get it straight. So, there it stands, like an evergreen John the Baptist in our front room, crookedly reminding us of how unprepared we are. At some point, and I confess the first time we’ll have time might be after Christmas Day, we’ll decorate the darn thing, going through the annual ritual of wondering why we have enough ornaments for seventeen trees. We’ll ask each other if this is the year to clean things out and let some of it go, and then we’ll pack every last bit of it back up so that we can do the same thing next year.

2. Of course, trimming the tree and sorting through the decorations is the easy part. The Presbyterian preacher Kathy Beach-Verhey reminds us that, while we occupy ourselves with decking the halls, drinking eggnog, and listening to Bing Crosby, John calls us to a different, deeper preparation “John’s challenge,” she writes, “is to repent and prepare. True repentance means, literally, to change one’s mind, turn around, reorient oneself. John calls all people to turn to God and from sin, to seek God’s forgiveness, and to prepare the way of the Lord.” And we do so, I’d add, not simply or even primarily for ourselves, but so that all flesh, all people, would see and know the salvation of the God who is coming to us in Christ.

3. Advent, then, is a good time to not simply go through our old decorations but to look at ourselves, our world, and honestly consider of what we might let go. This is, perhaps, less about making minor adjustments in our own lives, however helpful, and more about the big picture. Luke, ever the historian, locates John and Jesus in their broader context, a world that is less in need of mild self-help and more in need of a total renovation. God’s people live in a land of oppression, ruled over from afar by Tiberius, controlled by the local despots Herod, Philip, and Lysanias, and abetted by the religious establishment, led by Annas and Caiaphas. Against this backdrop, John proclaims, a new Lord is coming, and the change will not be cosmetic or superficial. It will be drastic and total, a complete upending of all that has gone wrong in God’s good creation and, indeed, in us.

4. Growing up in Wisconsin we had a saying, and I think it’s used here in Chicagoland, too: There are only two seasons – winter and road construction. It seems that Advent may be situated in winter, but it’s actually construction season. God is coming, and it’s time for the valleys to be filled in and the mountains made low; the crooked made straight and the rough ways made smooth. God is making a new road into the jagged, broken places of this world. Where might God be making new roads today? In long-oppressed

Syria, where brutality has reigned, but new hope is being glimpsed amid uncertainty? In our health care system, in which insurance practices seem to be leading to violence? One could go on and on, but it is easy enough to see that there is much in our world that is broken, much that demands total reconstruction, much even in our own hearts that needs to be put to death and given new life. Death itself, so busy in our congregation in these days, needs to be dealt with. And deal with it God will, removing the last obstacle that would hold us back and keep us down.

5. John the Baptist interrupts our lives with his call to prepare, which is always and ever urgent. As the preacher Wes Avram points out, in the New Testament writings there is always something about to happen. Apocalyptic sensibility hangs heavy in the air. "Time," he writes, "is full and ready to break open." We are invited by John, therefore, to cast off despair, cynicism, and expediency. For God is coming. With judgment, yes, but always followed by grace. What is knocked down in and around us, all that is broken, hateful, and oppressive, will be built back up, with and for love. We are invited to open up and look through the old bins and consider what we might finally let go, that God's coming Kingdom would break through all the more. John calls us to look at ourselves with clear eyes. He echoes Malachi, who speaks of a refiner's fire and fullers' soap. The sin in us and the brokenness of the world is deep enough that such processes are warranted, burning up or scrubbing out all that is wrong. But instead, God invites us to the waters of grace, foreshadowed by John and Jesus in the waters of the Jordan, just a bit later in the story. In the font of grace, we find ourselves gently washed, made new, joined to the death and the resurrection of Jesus, rebuilt and newly constructed for life abundant on both sides of the grave. As you get your trees straightened and your decorations sorted again this year, take a look at yourself, too, clothed in the righteousness of the coming Christ. See yourself prepared by Christ, not simply for yourself, but so that others may see in you and hear from you about God's grand new creation, that all might know the

coming Christ and see in him the salvation God intends for all flesh, all people, indeed, this whole world. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.