



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Advent 2 (C)
December 5, 2021

RCL: Baruch 5:1-9 or Malachi 3:1-4; Canticle 4 or 16; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

During Advent and Christmas, we will be using study prompts and other activities tied to the sermon for the week. Read the sermon aloud and follow-up with spoken responses to the two questions at the end. Find our full sermon compilation for individual, small group, or congregational use, *Sermons for Advent and Christmas 2021* at www.sermonsthatwork.org.

Prepare the Way
by the Rev. Lucy Strandlund

There's a method of calling to a crowd and catching its attention in which a speaker says, "If you can hear the sound of my voice, clap once." Usually, in a gathered group, only a few closest to the speaker hear the instruction and clap. The unexpected sound of several people clapping once, however, catches the attention of a few more. The speaker then says, "If you can hear the sound of my voice, clap twice." And a few more people catch on. It continues until the crowd is hushed as more and more people clap in unison, three times, then four times. It's an effective way to gather the attention of a crowd without having to be the loudest one in the room, but it only works with the participation of more and more people. The speaker might talk in vain at an unresponsive, noisy crowd all day if the following of their instructions doesn't spread throughout the group.

While the prophets of scripture may have felt at times that they were speaking in vain, they caught enough attention that we continue to hear their words reverberate today. "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God," we hear from Micah 6:8. "Comfort, O comfort my people" encourages Isaiah 40:1. What was it about them that captured the attention of the people around them? Was there some kind of magnetic quality about them? Was it a fierce or wild look in their eyes? Or were their words from God simply so true in times so desperate that listening to them felt like solid ground in a shifting time?

We know theirs were not the only voices people could listen to. While the prophets were encouraging people to return to God, to care for the vulnerable, to be restored in relationship with one another, there were surely then, as now, competing voices for the people's attention—voices of power, greed, despair, or complacency that were louder than the prophets' call. And yet the prophets were heard through the generations.

The words of Isaiah were resonating so powerfully that John the Baptizer picked them up and echoed them centuries later: "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.'"

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John needed Isaiah and lived these words, calling those who heard him to repent and to begin anew, to prepare the way. In so doing, he invited more and more people to live Isaiah's words with him.

Yet John's voice was not the only one people heard. Today's passage from Luke begins with some of the other voices that competed for the attention of the crowds in the region near Judea and Galilee in the first century: Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip the ruler of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias the ruler of Abilene. And yet amid these rulers' claims to power and voice, people were drawn to John the Baptizer. John, who heard the word of God in the wilderness and went around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John, who answers in Luke 3:10 when the crowds ask, "What then should we do?" by saying, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." John, who showed them that valleys are filled and the mountains and hills made low when those with plenty share with those in need. They heard something they knew to be true in his words and the crowds flocked to him, hushing as they approached and listening. In his words, they heard restoration, justice, and hope.

But John was not the source of the words. Nor was Isaiah the source of the words. Isaiah and then John were like the ones standing nearby who hear the sound of the speaker's voice and clap in response. Because of their clapping, more and more people can identify and heed the speaker's voice. They, too, can join in the clapping to draw attention to the speaker, so that more and more people in turn can hear the words.

The voice to which they draw our attention may not be the loudest in the room, but it is steady. It is persistent. It is the voice of God who continually invites us all to return, to care for the vulnerable, to be in relationship with one another.

After all, prophets' words are not an end unto themselves; they point us back to God. They show the way when we've gotten a little turned around. They draw our attention when we've been distracted by the clamoring of other voices. Prophets tell the truth about things as they are and remind us that there is a better way. Prophets call us to notice where we've gotten off the path and call us to return to relationship with God and with one another—to share a coat when we have two, to share food when we have extra. Prophets are channels for the words of God so that we might hear those words, live them, and be channels too.

Listening to them can help us live the words of God in our own time, as they endeavored to do in theirs. Across the generations, we participate in the call to return to God, to care for the vulnerable, to restore relationship with one another. And we are called to trust that none of this is done in vain, but rather prepares the way.

When we attune our ears to and live the words shared by the prophets, we are able to better recognize the One who is to come, the Word who is restoration, justice, and hope. We are able to recognize the Christ who reconciles us and for whom we wait in this season of Advent with hopeful expectation.

So, today, let us focus our attention and allow a hush to fall over us so that we may hear the voice calling from the wilderness: "Prepare the way."

Amen.

The Rev. Lucy Strandlund currently serves as curate at St. John's Episcopal Church in New Braunfels, Texas. She holds a Master of Divinity and a Master of Arts in Spiritual Formation from the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. When not working, she loves to be outside, hiking, or growing vegetables and flowers.

1. It can be easy, especially now that December has begun, to fall into busyness, filling our hours with all the things that *must* be done. Stop intentionally for an hour this week from the busyness and meditate on where you can find the voices of John and Jesus through the noise. How did it feel? Could you try it again this week?

2. Who do you know who speaks God's truth even when it's unpopular? Consider how you can encourage and pray for that person. Then, let them know how important their ministry is to you.