“Comfort”

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 Luke 3:1-6

December 8, 2024 Advent 2

***Luke 3:1-6***

***3 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, 2during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4as 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.
5Every 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,
6and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”***

There are not a lot of scripture readings quite so difficult as those with lots of unpronounceable names. We might be familiar with the long list of city names included in any reading for Pentecost Day, listing all of the cities and therefore languages, that were being heard all at once, creating a sound like the rush of wind. Today’s reading is similar. We have names that are unusual but more familiar and pronounceable like Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, and Philip; but also unpronounceable locations and people such as Ituraea, Trachonitis – sounds like a throat disorder, Lysanias – sounds like a cleaning solution, Abilene – sounds like a type of fish, or maybe a country song.

Would it be more familiar if we read this: “In the fourth year of the Presidency of Joseph Biden, when Gavin Wilson was governor of the state of California, and London Breed was mayor of the city of San Francisco, and Congressional member Kevin Mullin represented District 15 for the County of San Mateo, and Rico Medina was mayor of San Bruno….”?

It sounds funny at first because we give biblical words so much more glory and mystique than we do the average government listings of our day and age. My example feels kind of mundane and yawn-worthy. The comparison of the biblical text to the made up words of my own, is to help us see this biblical text with all of its difficult to pronounce words and locations unknown to us, is a way of locating what follows within a particular place and time and specific historical circumstance.

It is also a typical formula used for the introduction to Old Testament prophets who were usually associated with particular rulers and circumstances. By using this same formula for introducing John the Baptist, Luke is making sure that readers, hearers, understand that John was a prophet. Not just any prophet, but specifically the prophet that the ancient prophet Isaiah spoke of when he said,

***‘****Prepare the way of the Lord;
    make his paths straight.
5Every 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,
6and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”*

These words would have been familiar to those reading Luke. They were not John’s words. Not yet. The lectionary in Year C gives us two weeks of John the Baptist. Today’s reading stops short of including John’s own words. That is saved for next week.

By stopping before John himself speaks, its as if someone has announced, I am about to tell you something important. Stop and listen, you’re going to want to hear this. Can I have your attention please. Like getting a Nixle alert on our phones – here comes something important. Describing the messenger in this way, anticipates our attention to the message.

Advent is a time of active waiting. We are using our time waiting actively preparing for the Big Something. At this early stage of the gospel of Luke, we don’t know what exactly that is, but we know it’s big.

What does actively waiting mean to us? Well, if you know that what you are waiting for is big, the first thing you might wonder is, how big is it and will it affect me? Your company is going to lay off 1,000 employees, (something big) and you wonder if you will be one of them (how will it affect me). Actively waiting to find out might look like getting a resume up-to-date, build up savings, look in advance for other opportunities out there.

I think of our recent election. Waiting for election results is in-actively waiting. Now that the results are in, no matter which corner you’re in, what’s coming is big (something big) and we ask how will it affect me? Actively waiting if you are not affected means finding someone or group who is affected and try to figure out what to do to help.

2,000 years later, on this side of the story, you and I do know what the Big Something is. The Church uses 365 days to re-enact the message of the gospel and the message of God in Christ. This time of Advent is a re-enactment of something that has already happened, so we have to pretend. We have to use our imagination and put ourselves into the story, in a different place each week.

In our adult education Advent class last Monday we talked about silence. When the father of John the Baptist first heard from the angel that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son even though she had thus far been barren, he didn’t believe it. For his disbelief the angel made Zechariah mute until the baby was born. He was waiting then, in silence. As we use scripture and our faith practices to actively wait we can perhaps put ourselves in Zechariah’s shoes and actively wait by being silent for a day, or a specified time.

This kind of pretending, these liturgical seasons, are a way to grow our spiritual practices, which deepen our faith and make our faith more relevant and purposeful. There are other examples of waiting. Advent calendars help us count down the days, by having us do something or giving us something every day before Christmas. I once got an advent calendar that had a short pair of silly socks for every day before Christmas! Another example of waiting especially this year for Advent while we are reading Luke, is to read one chapter of the gospel of Luke every day until Christmas, because the gospel of Luke has 24 chapters.

God is constantly involved in the salvation of God’s people, throughout history, in very specific places and circumstances, weaving through the ups and downs, the best and the worst of humanity. In our time and place, what messengers are catching our attention? And how is the good news being proclaimed? This advent we are invited to deepen our faith, grow our spiritual lives, and listen for God’s voice as we prepare to welcome the birth of God’s own Son.

Amen.