

BOUNDLESS LOVE PREPARES THE WAY

Luke 3:1-6

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/boundless-love-prepares-the-way/

I.

History has a way of bringing us back, doesn't it? Certain moments in time are etched into our collective memory, and when we think about them, they stir up emotions, thoughts, and images.

For instance, if I say "9/11," those of us old enough to remember are instantly carried to where we were when we heard the news or watched the horror unfold on live television. We remember the shock, the fear, the sense of uncertainty about what would come next. Or if I say "COVID-19," we all recall how life suddenly shifted - work or school went virtual, quarantines stretched from weeks to months, and we wondered when we'd gather again or hug our loved ones.

As a high school U.S. History teacher, one of my favorite projects aimed to capture this dynamic. Near the end of the school year, we were always rushing to cover the last five decades in just two weeks—a near-impossible task. To make it meaningful, I assigned students a project: interview five adults about the five most impactful historical events of their lifetimes.

The goal was twofold. First, I wanted to identify the key events that shaped our nation. Second, I hoped the students would hear personal stories that made history come alive. Grandpa Dean might mention the assassination of President Kennedy but also share how he heard the news and how it felt to experience the assassination of a president. Aunt Lucille might list the Cuban Missile Crisis but then go on to describe practicing nuclear drills at school, worrying daily about a missile attack that might end her senior year before it even began.

The students brought back a wealth of insights. Each year, we listed 60-70 events on the board. These weren't just historical moments—they were stories infused with emotion, stories that reminded us how history touches real lives.

This week, I asked my Facebook friends to name the top three historical events from their lifetime. The top five mentioned among 50-60 different events were 9-11, the Challenger space shuttle explosion, the COVID-19 pandemic, the assassination of President Kennedy, and the Vietnam War. All or some of these brought certain emotions, thoughts, and images to you as I said them.

These events anchor us in history, but they also remind us of something more profound: how moments of fear, loss, and uncertainty shape us. Even more, they remind us of how resilience, faith, and love carry us through.

II.

Luke begins today's Gospel passage in a way that might feel as dull as a high school history lecture. The author lists rulers, regions, and high priests. At first glance, it seems like background noise. But to Luke's original audience, these weren't just names—they were markers of memory. Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas—these names reminded them of oppression, heavy taxation, and fear. Much like "after 9/11" or "in the year of the pandemic" are markers of painful memories for us, these names mentioned by Luke carried the weight of a world in turmoil.

The rulers he names were infamous for their cruelty and greed. The religious leaders of the time were often more concerned with maintaining their power than leading people closer to God. They rule in stark contrast to the way God reigns in Christ.

It is into these dark memories of fear and struggle, that Luke plants a stunning declaration of hope: "The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness." In the middle of chaos and despair, when rulers were cruel and priests complicit, when wealth and position opened doors and ethnicity and gender closed them, God's word showed up.

Even more remarkable is where and to whom God's word comes. Not in a palace, not to the political or religious elite, but in the wilderness to John—an unlikely messenger clothed in camel's hair, living on locusts and wild honey, and preaching repentance and salvation is near.

When God comes, when God speaks, when God reveals God's self to the world in a new way, you are just as likely to be the one God comes to as someone else. The problem is you may miss God's coming if you're not paying attention. That's the message of Advent.

III.

A professor of mine in seminary had a sign over their door that read, "Jesus is coming! Look busy!" It's funny because it mirrors how we often live. Like the frantic rush before hosting a holiday party, we scramble to make things look perfect by cleaning, organizing, and shoving the clutter into a closet or spare bedroom and closing the door. It's a mad dash that drives everyone mad. Look busy! Guests are coming!

All Advent says is 'company's coming.' If I came home from school as a child and my mother said, "Company's coming," my sister and I had specific things to do to prepare our home to receive guests. Garbage cans were emptied, the bathroom was cleaned, the shag carpet raked (if you know, you know), and our bedrooms had to be presentable, or the bedroom door closed.

John the Baptist's message, lifted from the pages of the book of Isaiah, was simple but powerful: "Prepare the way of the Lord." "Company's coming, and it's God! Prepare the way of the Lord!

There were plenty of problems in the world that John could and did point to – the unrighteous corruption of King Herod, for instance — but the first problem to be addressed is the one inside

every one of us. Everybody, John said, needs to repent. The movement of repentance is typically misunderstood. It's not about feeling bad about yourself and the sins you've committed, though an awareness of sin is a part of it. It's a fundamental change of direction – of the way we think and approach life. John recognized that we all get stuck in ourselves. We become our center — the consequences of which are ultimately destructive and life-taking – when the rightful center is the mystery of the life-giving God. A movement needs to occur where we return to a state in which God is at the center, and that movement is repentance. John said everybody – not just *some* people – needs to repent. Only then will we be able to hear the life-giving Word of the Lord.

IV.

Suppose you knew you had an appointment with the Lord this Wednesday at 11:00 a.m. How would you prepare for that moment? I've been reflecting on what I would do. What would I wear to meet God? A nice dress and jacket, or maybe my clergy robe? What would I bring? My Girls in Action mission badges or Sunday School perfect attendance pins, maybe my giving records, or my worn and highlighted Bible? Perhaps I'd take my ordination certificate. Or maybe I'd sit across the table and say, "Jesus is all I've got." I can almost hear God respond, "That's enough."ⁱ

Because Jesus taught that loving God and loving others truly matter in a life where God is at the center, I think I'd want to spend my time making sure my relationships are in order. I'd tell the people I love how much they mean to me and apologize to those I've wronged. I'd tell anyone I could how much God loves them just as they are and how following Jesus was the best decision they could ever make. I'd make sure I showed them that love, too, so they'd know my words were true. I'd share what I could, treat others with dignity, and ensure they were safe, fed, welcomed, and heard. Above all, I'd ensure my relationship with God was right. I'd want to step into that meeting with a clean house with nothing hidden from God in a spare bedroom. I'd want to show up to that appointment with joy and gratitude, and I could. I could do that if I centered my life daily on the truth that God's love and grace are boundless gifts for me, regardless of what I wear or do. And if I could center my life on that truth, well, I think I'd be ready and eager to show up Wednesday at 11 a.m. to meet with the One I love and the One who loves me. Maybe loving God and others each day because of how God first loved us might help me and you not miss the boundless presence of God's company.

V.

One of the great mysteries and gifts of Scripture is its ability to meet us wherever we are. Some of us this morning might be full of joy. Maybe you're celebrating the birth of a grandchild or the beginning of a new chapter in life. You hear this passage and feel inspired, reminded of God's faithfulness and how God shows up in unexpected places.

Others might come here today carrying heavy burdens. You look at the state of the world or our nation—at the divisions, injustices, and senseless violence—and wonder if anything will ever change. The phrase "prepare the way of the Lord" might sound like an impossible task when so

much feels broken. The way of the Lord may feel more like a Missouri road after the harsh winter salt leaves behind potholes and craters.

And then, there are those of us simply trying to keep life together. Maybe you're juggling work and family, caring for an aging parent, lonely amid all the people, or wondering how you'll make it through another week. For you, the idea of preparing anything, much less the way of the Lord, might feel overwhelming.

Wherever we are today, Luke's Gospel tells us this truth: amid chaos, amid the mess of life, amid the corruption and injustice, amid the joys and disappointments, amid the highs and lows - wherever we are, **God shows up with good news of great joy which will be for all the people.** The world as it was—barren of hope and empty of God's presence—has ended, and a new world has begun, filled with boundless love and overflowing with God's boundless presence in Christ Jesus. That is good news for you, the weary, the one in the wilderness. And it is good news to a weary world that longs to rejoice.

As we journey through Advent, we are invited to prepare—not just for Christmas but for the coming of God's love into our world and lives right now. What might need to change in your life so God's love can flow more freely? Where are the valleys, mountains, and rough places that need attention?

- Filling valleys could mean uplifting those struggling—offering kindness and support to someone who feels forgotten.
- Leveling Mountains might involve confronting our pride or prejudice and tearing down the barriers that prevent us from loving and including others fully.
- Smoothing rough places could involve mending a broken relationship, extending forgiveness, or asking for forgiveness where needed.

Just as our collective memory brings us back to the emotions of 9/11, the fear of the Cuban Missile Crisis, or the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Gospel invites us to anchor ourselves in the story of a God who meets us in these moments—not just in the grand events but also in the personal, intimate wildernesses of our lives. The good news is that God's love meets us where we are. It shows up in chaos, chooses unlikely messengers, and works through us to bring hope, love, peace, and joy to the world.

And isn't that what history teaches us? That amid the darkest days—whether standing in the shadow of collapsing towers, the grief of personal loss, or even the solitude of quarantine—there is a thread of hope that carries us forward? Among such events were also stories of resilience, faith, and love. And there are and can be stories of resilience, faith, and love in today's events as we, the people of God, prepare a way for hope and love to break in through us. And maybe we prepare the way of the Lord today, tomorrow, and Wednesday at 11 am, and the day after that by loving God and others each day because of how God first loved us. Maybe if we turn our lives to center on that boundless love, we might be ready for company to come.

For, in the fourth year of Joseph Biden's presidency, when Mike Johnson was speaker of the House of Representatives, when Mike Parsons was governor of Missouri, when Ron Fitzwater was mayor of Jefferson City, and during the papal leadership of Pope Francis, the word of God came to the likes of you and me. Let us prepare the way! Amen.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ My appreciation to Jim Somerville for this metaphor of meeting with God.