

## Advent 2 – Year C

“Dwight D. Eisenhower being president of the United States and John Patterson the governor of Alabama, J. Edgar Hoover the omnipotent autocrat of the FBI, Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale, the high priests of middle America, the word of God came to Martin Luther King in the wilderness of America.”

Gardner Calvin Taylor, known as the “Dean of American Preaching,” was an African-American Baptist preacher and the grandson of emancipated slaves. And that was what he preached on the Gospel text we have today.

In our own day, William H. Lamar IV, writing in *Christian Century*, says that it might sound like this: “Donald John Trump being president of the United States and Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III the attorney general, Rudolph Giuliani the ubiquitous and loquacious defender of the present order, Franklin Graham, Paula White, and Joel Osteen the prophets of American civil religion, the word of God came to ...”

Ah, but who does the Word come to today? Who is the prophet today?

Former Evangelical and now Episcopalian author Rachel Held Evans reminds us, “Biblically speaking, a prophet isn’t a fortune-teller or soothsayer who predicts the future, but rather a truth-teller who sees things as they really are—past, present, and future—and who challenges their community to both accept that reality and imagine a better one.” That’s the role that Baruch plays in our first reading. Baruch is acknowledging that the people of Israel have been – and perhaps are still – wearing the garments of “sorrow and affliction.” But he calls that same community to put on the robe of righteousness that comes from God. Remember here that God’s righteousness is caring for the poor, the needy, the widow and orphan. God’s righteousness is justice and mercy. When God’s people do that, Baruch says, then God will bring back all the children of Israel. Acknowledging their captivity and exile, the prophet says,

“For they went out from you on foot,  
led away by their enemies;  
but God will bring them back to you,  
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.”

Baruch is labeled as a prophet, but the book of Baruch is part of the “Apocrypha” – meaning it does not appear in all Bibles. Like many apocryphal books, it quotes often from other sources. And so, in our reading for today, we hear what sounds like a passage from Isaiah quoted in today’s Gospel passage:

“For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low  
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,  
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.”

Here, it is God who is making the mountains low and raising the valleys to make the way safe for God’s people to return to the glory, the presence of God.

Baruch is, indeed, “a truth-teller who sees things as they really are—past, present, and future—and who challenges the community to both accept that reality and imagine a better one.”

And then we come to the Gospel, where Luke dramatically contrasts John with the powers of his day. The listing is intentional. It has a purpose. Tiberius was known for carrying on trials for sedition and treason, for deporting the Jews from Rome, and generally conducting a reign of terror. Pilate’s rule was corrupt, taking bribes, carrying out executions without trials. Herod Antipas was using tremendous amounts of money on capital construction at Tiberius and was placing Roman images in Jewish and other sacred places, defiling them. And Annas and Caiaphas were the symbols of power controlling the Temple and thus the religion of the people. It was corruption all around.

And amid it all, the word of God comes to *John* – a strange man in his own right... eating locusts and wild honey, wearing odd clothing, someone we would probably avoid if we met him on the street – or in the desert. Much of the first chapter of Luke’s gospel is devoted to telling us about John, how he came to be born, and his purpose, some of which we sang about in the Cantic of Zechariah after the first reading. But the line that immediately follows the Cantic is important information about John that we might miss. We’re told, “The child” – that is John – “grew and became strong in spirit, and he was *in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.*” The word of God comes to John *in the wilderness* – where he already was.

“The wilderness” is almost a meme in Scripture. It is both a place of scarcity and desolation, and a place of safety and strengthening. Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years, but there God provided manna and quail. David ran to the wilderness to be safe from Saul, and Elijah went to the wilderness to hide from those seeking to kill him. Jesus went to the wilderness after his baptism before beginning his ministry, and he often leads the disciples or goes himself to a place apart to pray.

My dear sisters and brothers, “the wilderness” is not an historic reference; it’s the subject of the daily new. *We are in the wilderness...* the wilderness of scarcity and isolation and violence that surrounds us without our choosing, much as the Israelites were led away into exile and captivity, perhaps. But I believe Advent calls us to enter the wilderness intentionally – the wilderness that is a place of strengthening, a wilderness where we choose to quiet the noise that generally surrounds us, a wilderness where we can listen for and hear the voice of God.

Because - “Donald John Trump being president of the United States and Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III the former attorney general, Rudolph Giuliani the ubiquitous and loquacious defender of the present order, Franklin Graham, Paula White, and Joel Osteen the prophets of American civil religion, the word of God” comes to us. We are the ones called to speak. We are called to be prophet – to be the “truth-teller who sees things as they really are—past, present, and future—and who challenges their community to both accept that reality and imagine a better one.”

We are called, like John, to be “the voice of one crying out” in this wilderness in which we live, to go before the Lord to prepare the way.” John prepared the way by calling the people of his time – and us - to repent – to change our ways and our way of looking, so that we might recognize the coming of God in our midst. But that “repentance” – that change in our ways of seeing and living – is not just about us as individuals – it is about us as a people, as a body. We repent, we turn from, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf. And the turning, the repenting, has to include making the path straight for others, lowering the mountains of obstacles that keep people from having enough to eat or a decent wage or an affordable place to live, raising the valleys of depression and despair that hold far too many bound by giving of ourselves and our time, our attention and our person.

We prepare the way by opening our eyes to see the way things are, and then by repenting, changing our perspective so we might recognize the coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom already in our midst, even as we make straight the path for its coming.

In the tender compassion of our God \*  
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,  
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, \*  
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

May it be so.

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