



LESSONS

MALACHI 3:1-4 OR
BARUCH 5:1-9

ST. LUKE 1:68-79 (78)

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11

ST. LUKE 3:1-6

BIBLE IN 90 DAYS TEXT

ROMANS 5:1-11

PRAYER OF THE DAY

STIR UP OUR HEARTS,
LORD GOD, TO PREPARE
THE WAY OF YOUR ONLY
SON. BY HIS COMING
GIVE TO ALL THE PEOPLE
OF THE WORLD
KNOWLEDGE OF YOUR
SALVATION; THROUGH
JESUS CHRIST, OUR
SAVIOR AND LORD, WHO
LIVES AND REIGNS WITH
YOU AND THE HOLY
SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW
AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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Liturgical Day: The Second Sunday of Advent

Date: December 2, 2009

Sermon Title: "Brace yourselves, boys; here it comes!"

Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.

I'm remembering a scene in a movie I saw many years ago – long enough ago, that I can't even remember which one it was. In this scene, there was a small group of men, sequestered behind a locked and bolted door. A big double-door, like you might find at the main entrance to a castle. Outside, their opponents were making a battering ram ready. Their hope was to smash through the entrance, and overpower those who were inside. And so this group placed heavy furniture against the door. They tied it together as best they could. Finally, they each leaned up against the barrier, hoping to repel the attack. One man climbed on top of the barrier, and was watching through a crack in the door. He relayed to the men below that they had the battering ram in place. They had picked it up. They were beginning to run towards the door. And then, just before the impact, he cries out: "They are almost here. Brace yourselves, boys; here it comes!" A moment later the battering ram hit the door, exploded it into pieces, the furniture piled up against it was scattered, and the group of men inside were blown to the far end of the hall by the impact.

Brace yourselves, boys; here it comes! I've never really thought of it this way before, but I wonder if that is what John the Baptist had in mind, when he began to prepare the people to meet Jesus in the first century. And I wonder if that is what the church had in mind, when it created the season of Advent, and designed it as an opportunity for us to prepare ourselves for what's coming.

My guess is that most of us, when we think about preparing during the season of Advent, have something much tamer in mind. We probably think of colored lights, and evergreen sprigs, and red & green ornaments. We probably think of brunches and gift exchanges and Christmas cards. We may even think of acts of kindness, shared with those we otherwise might not connect with very often.

Truth is: what John the Baptist had in mind was much fiercer, much more overpowering than we might imagine. This week's text invites us into that. John calls his listeners to prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah. And how does John describe it? Every valley shall be filled. Every mountain and hill shall be made low. Every crooked road will be straightened out. Every rough road will be repaved. This is no Norman Rockwell nostalgia. This is a dire warning. If we are to make room for this Christ in our lives, there is some heavy construction that is going to have to take place. Some mountains are going to have to come down. Some valleys are going to have to be filled in. "Brace yourselves, boys; here it comes!"

For many people, time spent with John the Baptist was nothing less than life-changing. He was a bold and compelling preacher. He forced his listeners to take their sinfulness seriously – not hinting at vague

generalities, but having them look carefully and



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God's work. Our hands.

honestly at their own brokenness, and at their own need for forgiveness. And then he did something quite dramatic. He led them out into the stiff current of the Jordan River, and pushed them down under its surface. I like to imagine that he held them there just a bit longer than was comfortable for them, and then he pulled them back up into the air. It drove the point home – that if they were going to be ready to receive the One who was about to come, all that was unhealthy – all that was ungodly – in them needed to die, in order to make room for what was to come. I can almost hear John saying, just before he immersed them, “Brace yourselves; here it comes!”

Advent is, for us, a season of waiting for and anticipating the arrival of the Christ in our lives. But the Jesus who comes to us – the Jesus of the Bible – is not necessarily one who comes to bless us and gently modify the lives we are currently living. He comes to bring wholesale change. He comes to tear down mountains, fill in valleys, straighten out and pave rough roads.

The question at hand is: What needs to change in our lives, to make room for Christ to be born in us? We’ve been involved with the “Bible in 90 Days” initiative lately. A number of our readers discovered that they can spend 40-60 minutes a day reading God’s word, and it has made a real difference for them. That may be a larger commitment than most of can or should make over the long haul, but it speaks to how Christ can be born in us as we make the commitment to read the Bible regularly.

You are here this evening for mid-week worship, and some of you are discovering that it is possible to make the commitment to worship twice a week, as we prepare for the coming of Christ. When worshipping twice a week, we have a richer sense of God’s presence – as we are fed, forgiven, and freed for a life of following our Lord. Christ can be born among us as we commit ourselves to regular patterns of worship.

Many of our members have participated in the “Adopt-a-Family” program this Christmas. In doing so, we are attempting to reverse the typical direction of Christmas: refusing to let this season be all about us, and patterning our lives after the One who came to give himself for the world. Christ can be born among us as we join him in caring for the world around us.

Our 2010 Pledge Drive is drawing to a conclusion. Even in these tight economic times – perhaps especially in these tight economic times – we have a chance to live into the belief that God is still our #1 priority by giving generously in support of ministry. Christ can be born among us as we grow in our capacity to be generous in how we fund the ministries of our congregation.

This past Sunday many of you gathered in the Fellowship Hall and made Advent wreaths, and also made plans to gather around them as a family during this Advent season. This can be a time of encouragement and accountability for those of us who live with others. Christ can be born among us as we take time each day to turn to God in prayer.

These are just some of the ways we welcome changes that make room for Christ in our lives. The closer this comes to tearing down mountains and filling in valleys, the more likely we are to be touched by the grace and power of the One who is born among us.

That is the message of John the Baptist – and the message of the Advent season. This week we are called to explore the ways that God can do some heavy construction in our lives. So brace yourselves; here it comes! Have a good Advent. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 6, 2009)

Gospel Lesson; English Text: ⁱ

^{3:1} In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, 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, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as 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. ⁵ 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; ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{3:1} Ἐν τει δὲ πεντεκαιδεκάτῳ τῆς ἡγεμονίας Τιβερίου Καίσαρος, ἡγεμονεύοντος Ποντίου Πιλάτου τῆς Ἰουδαίας, καὶ τετραρχούντος τῆς Γαλιλαίας Ἡρῶδου, Φιλίππου δὲ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ τετραρχούντος τῆς Ἰτουραίας καὶ Τραχωνίτιδος χώρας, καὶ Λυσανίου τῆς Ἀβιληνῆς τετραρχούντος, ² ἐπὶ ἀρχιερέως Ἄννα καὶ Καϊάφα, ἐγένετο ῥῆμα θεοῦ ἐπὶ Ἰωάννην τὸν Ζαχαρίου υἱὸν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ. ³ καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς πᾶσαν [τὴν] περιχώρον τοῦ Ἰορδάνου κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς φεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, ⁴ ὡς γέγραπται ἐν βίβλῳ λόγων Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου· φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ· ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ· ⁵ πᾶσα φάραγξ πληρωθήσεται καὶ πᾶν ῥος καὶ βουνὸς ταπεινωθήσεται, καὶ σται τὰ σκολιὰ εἰς εὐθείαν καὶ αἱ τραχεῖαι εἰς ὁδοὺς λείας· ⁶ καὶ ψεται πᾶσα σὰρξ τὸ σωτήριον τοῦ θεοῦ. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Lectionary.aspx>
ⁱⁱ St. Luke 3:1-6, *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Luke 3:1-6, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).