

“Sharing Highs and Lows”
Advent 2c
Luke 3:1-6

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Grace Lutheran Church
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In Jesus' Name.

We hear some sets of words so often that they take on the qualities of a formula. If we hear, “The Lord be with you,” even without looking we know we are in church. Secondly, we are conditioned to respond, “And also with you.” When we hear, “Lord in your mercy,” we say, “Hear our prayer.”

Do you recognize these words? “On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country, to obey...” That is the scout oath. You are at a meeting of either the Boy or the Girl Scouts.

How about this one? “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth...?” You are in a court of law or watching a television show listening to a witness being sworn in.

Try this one. “773-202-LUNA.” That puts us on the couch for the evening news telecast and listening to a this commercial, what, a dozen times.

“It’s been a quiet week in Lake Wobegone.” Applause comes with that sentence which is the way Garrison Keillor always begins the news segment of his radio program, “A Prairie Home Companion,” telling stories about the residents of “this mythical town that time forgot and the decades could not improve,” including Pastor Engseth at Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church and Father Emil down at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility. And he always ends by saying, “That’s the news from Lake Wobegon, where the women are strong, the men are good looking and all the children are above average.”

Some formulas are more serious than others. Where and when do we hear these words, “I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of...”? That’s from the oath of office given to the president on Inauguration Day. Under the pressure of the moment US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts misplaced the word “faithfully.” Maybe he was trying to improve the grammar. They redid the oath later in case anyone would question the validity of it.

Here is one from the bible. “The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of

King Josiah son of Amnon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. Now the word of the Lord came to me saying....” Similar formulas are used for Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah. All these prophets are set in place and time by a similar formula

What then are we to think when we hear, “In the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins....”

When we hear that we know we’ve got a prophet on our hands, which is another way of saying we’ve got trouble on our hands. When the prophet Elijah went to meet King Ahab, Ahab greeted him saying, “Is it you, you troubler of Israel.” That pretty well sums up the work of all the prophets. The prophets are God’s mouthpieces, God’s messengers. God sent them when there was something about the behavior of kings and the practices of the people that troubled God. God sent the prophets to confront the people with their faults. Who among us enjoys having our faults pointed out to us? Through the prophets God pointed out their faults, called the people to repentance, and dangled before them the promise of forgiveness. God sent this troubler, this prophet John to do just that and more.

Luke quotes from the prophet Isaiah to sum up the trouble to come our way from John. John is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Luke changes Isaiah’s punctuation. Isaiah wrote, “The voice of one crying out, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.’” Luke locates the voice in the wilderness. John calls us to meet him there. The people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years. In the wilderness God formed them into a people for himself. John calls us to the wilderness where God undertakes a construction project. It is one thing when the road building takes place in the wilderness, cutting the highway through forests and mountains. It is quite another matter when we are the terrain upon which the project takes place. Isaiah was talking about God providing a roadway in the wilderness for the exiles to come

home from Babylon. When Luke moved the comma (actually they did not use punctuation, but figuratively speaking, when Luke moved the comma) the contours of our lives are what God proposes to bulldoze in order to prepare us to be the roadway for the Lord.

I had a co-worker in the church I served in Virginia. She was from North Carolina. She attended Duke Divinity School in Durham, NC. One day we fell into a conversation about that region of the country and the states of Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina. She said, “I grew up with the saying, ‘North Carolina is a valley of humility between two mountains of conceit,’” meaning the people of South Carolina and Virginia. When Luke used these lines from Isaiah to describe John’s preaching it is clear that in God’s construction project God intends to fill in our valleys, level off our arrogant and smug high spots, smooth out our rough edges, and straighten out what is crooked about us. And it will trouble our personal terrain as much as bulldozers, road graders, and dynamite trouble nature’s landscape.

Our first reading today is also used to describe John’s work. The images are even more graphic. John comes to prepare us because the coming one is like fuller’s soap and a refiner’s fire. We have some serious stains that Fels Naptha won’t get out. The soap used by fullers to clean and whiten sheep’s wool will take the skin right off of us. We have impurities that can’t be gently picked out the way momma with a tweezers works the splinter out of a child’s finger. No, these impurities require fire. They must be burned away. Who will drag them close enough to hell fire to burn them away but not us with them? Malachi says the Lord coming to his temple is like refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. “Who can stand when he appears,” he asks. What John has us doing is practicing standing for his appearance. John calls us into the wilderness to prepare to see salvation. We prepare by practicing, rehearsing.

John prepared a people who recognized their need for God’s grace. We rehearse. “Most merciful God we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought word and deed. . . .” These are the words that level off our smug and arrogant high places. Then we hear the words that fill in our valleys, “Almighty God, in his mercy has given his Son to die for us and for his sake forgives us all our sins.”

We rehearse standing when he appears when we confess our faith, “I believe in God the Father almighty creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius

Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell.” This is the one who bears our sins all the way to hell and back to save us.

We rehearse by bringing our offerings. What so troubled God that he sent the prophet Malachi was that people were bringing as offerings the animals no one wanted and the sweepings from the granary floor. We bring our first fruits offerings that are shared with the poor to rehearse for the day when all will have enough to eat.

We rehearse by learning from Scripture the language of God’s kingdom. We practice mercy in this community in preparation for the day when God’s mercy is the final arbiter.

We pray for the coming of the kingdom and we share a supper that whets our appetite for the wedding banquet of the one who is coming into the world.

John marks the end of an era. No longer will God’s word be refracted through the mouth of a prophet. One era comes to an end with him and a new one dawns with God’s Word in the flesh. We rehearse for this regularly in both Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, quoting from chapter one of the book of Hebrews, “In many and various ways God spoke to God’s people of old by the prophets. But, now in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” Even so, come Lord Jesus.