

“All Flesh Shall See”  
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
December 9, 2018  
Luke 3:1-6

A couple of weeks ago Karen and I were flipping through the TV channels, looking for anything but cable news (we needed a break), and landed on the last 20 minutes or so of the movie “Forrest Gump.” Even though we’d seen it at least three times, it draws you in, and there is such a beautiful ending to it. If you’ve seen it, you’ll remember that floating feather that opens and closes the movie. The feather is a symbol that sometimes the most important people are those we don’t see, like Forrest Gump himself. In terms of our gospel reading this morning, we might picture the feather as the scene begins floating over Herod’s palace or Ceasar’s Roman mansion only to have a gust of wind take the feather up and up, far from the citadels of civilization. The camera follows the feather until it slowly begins to lilt downward out in the middle of a wilderness wasteland, coming to land at the calloused and filthy foot of a wild looking man called John. He’s got wild honey dripping off his scraggly beard and is dressed in something that could best be described as resembling the fur of some road-kill animal from the side of a highway. He has a distant look in his eye, as though at any moment he might lunge forward and spout off whatever fool thing comes into his head. Except that Luke tells us that what’s coming into his head is a far cry from any fool thing. The man at whose feet our random Forrest Gump feather lands is the cosmic target for nothing short of “the Word of the Lord.”

Walter Brueggemann says of Advent: *“Advent asks if we are bold and sharp enough to speak the hurts that belong to our weary world. It asks if we are ready and open enough for a newness to be given. It asks if we know the name of the Father to whom we belong, of the Lord whom we confess, of the coming one for whom we wait, and if we trust that one enough to relinquish the old world.”*

John the Baptizer is the lead figure (connecting figure) in the gospel’s vision of the movement from the “old world” to “the newness to be given.” He shows up every year at Advent, and frankly, he’s about as unwelcome and out of place when it comes to our preparations for Christmas as he was in the fifteenth year of Tiberius’ reign. When John speaks he is always interrupting, throwing cold water on our holiday celebrations. But there he is, out there in the wilderness, crying out “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.” He reminds his listeners of the ancient Advent promise of Isaiah that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” With the clear voice of the prophet John tells us how to prepare for the coming of God. He preached a baptism of repentance – that there’s a big change coming, and you have to change in order to see it and know it, to be a part of it.

The word of the Lord came to John – the son of Zechariah – and Luke wants us to know right up front who the word did not come to. No fewer than 7 historical political and religious figures are named. There is Tiberius, the Roman emperor, in the fifteenth year of his reign. There is the

governor over Judea, Pontius Pilate, and Herod who ruled over Galilee, his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanius who ruled over Abilene. It was also during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. Annas was the most influential priest of his generation. He cast such a prominent shadow over the Temple that five of his sons attained the office of high priest. So did his son-in-law, Joseph Caiaphas. Together they led the religious life for all of Israel. And so what we have here is a veritable who's who of the political and religious establishment. And then there was John, without pedigree, a lone puff of wind out there in the wilderness. We're supposed to notice the irony of this – and take it to heart – because Luke wants us to know something about how, through what and through whom we hear, see, taste, smell, and otherwise sense the ancient wilderness voice of God alive in us and in our specific time and place.

John's moment came in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, when Pilate was governor and Herod was tetrarch- located in a particular time and place in human history, among particular people, amidst the intrigue and oppressiveness and violence of colonial politics and an established religion whose leaders found ways to benefit from the arrangement. The word of God came not to them, but to John. John would get in trouble with those authorities. It was Herod who would eventually have him beheaded. And the one whom John announced was coming would himself be challenged and finally killed by these same powers – who had a large stake in resisting the outbreak of God's reign.

Just as Luke would have us know where to look to see and how to hear and otherwise sense the word of God, he would also have us be aware of the how the powers of this world are invested in resisting it, in maintaining the human geography largely as it is. Each power has its own vision of the "salvation of all flesh," visions that often compete with one another, as we see today even within our own nation. Yet in every human vision of the good and just society there never seems to be enough – enough resources, enough political will, enough power among competing interests – to bring it about. But yet the word of God came to John in a particular time and place, in the midst of Roman oppression and the colluding powers of official Judaism. They got along as long as they didn't try to mix politics and religion. But John mixed it up in both realms by proclaiming the advent, the coming, of one who will cut through it all, who will make the path straight and the rough places smooth – the one who will be the salvation of all flesh.

Now John didn't seem to know how this would happen, exactly how the Word of God would take on life. He knew it wasn't going to be through him; he wasn't even sure it would be through Jesus. Remember how he sent word to Jesus from prison, asking if he was the one, or should they look for another? The word of God that came to John was just to proclaim it, help people get ready for it, and step out of the way. "I must decrease," he said.

The ancient vision of Isaiah, which John calls upon to announce the coming of the one who is to save, calls upon those who would hear it to do only one thing: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." The rest is not our doing. We're not the subject: "Every valley shall be lifted up, every hill brought low, the crooked ways shall be made straight, the rough places smooth." And then, we're brought in again at the end: "All flesh shall see the salvation of God."

And so it is for us to prepare the way – which is something within our capacity to pull off, with God's help. The vision that John proclaims is way beyond the capacities of this world's powers to bring about. This is why, in reality, the word John received was of no threat to them, just as Jesus' ministry was of no threat to them. "My kingdom is not from this world," he told Pilate when Pilate asked him if he was a king. But it didn't matter: he was perceived as a threat, and that's often all that seems to count. Every vested interest in the old order will be challenged by the word of Christ, and the new creation will not come cheaply. John churned this up, disrupting the enforced peace and order of the world's powers, just as he disrupts the ease with which we assume that our lives are ready for God's reign, our comfort with the way things are, that time is on our side.

A clergyman tells of going with his wife to the funeral of a relative of one of his church members. It was at a little country church, a denomination and style of worship not his own. The funeral sermon consisted of the preacher whooping and shouting to the congregation: "It's too late for old Joe. He's dead! He might have wanted to give his life to God, to join the church. Can't now – he's dead!" The visiting minister thought to himself how comforting this must be to the grieving family.

"Joe's time is up," the preacher continued, "but your time, brothers and sisters, is not up. If you're going to give your life to God, do it today. If you're going to get your life right, do it now. There's still time!"

On the way home in the car the minister was telling his wife how disgusted he was, how insensitive, manipulative, and tacky that funeral sermon was. She agreed. It was insensitive, inappropriate, and manipulative. "And worst of all," she said, "it was true."

The minister may have been guilty of bad manners, and we may or may not agree with his theology – but if there is anything redemptive in his story it is that our faith, as long as we have life within us to live it, must not be too at ease with itself, nor should it be at ease with the current arrangements of the old order of things, where those in the valley of oppression or despair remain oppressed and despairing; where mountains of hurt are heaped on our weary world, and bigotry and hate block the advancement of love and justice.

There are moments, such as the one we are living in, when events force a profound dis-ease with current arrangements – and Advent reminds us that is where we should be. The events of our own particular time and place in history should awaken in us, as people of faith, a readiness and openness for a "newness to be given."

In his book, "The Alphabet of Grace" Fredrick Buechner writes of a talk he was supposed to give on religious matters – noble words like incarnation, grace and salvation. He says that *"if you are more than academically interested in (these particular mysteries), you could do a lot worse than look to your feet for an answer. Introspection in the long run doesn't get you very far because every time you draw back to look at yourself, you are seeing everything except for the*

*part that drew back, and when you draw back to look at the part that drew back to look at yourself, you see again everything except for what you are really looking for. And so on. Since the possibilities for drawing back seem to be infinite, you are, in your quest to see yourself whole, doomed always to see infinitely less than what there will always remain to see. Thus, when you wake up in the morning, called by God to be a self again, if you want to know who you are, watch your feet. Because where your feet take you, that is who you are."*

Where your feet take you – what road you're walking down. Rome built its roads and highways and bridges that could take you around the ancient world better than at any point in recorded human history. The roads were grand. I've read that Ceasar's wife had begun a "Highway Beautification" initiative. The roads were grand, the travel was easy, the trade routes were prosperous. But not one of those roads could finally take you anywhere worth going. They could help you get around in the world but not one of them could save the world or usher in a New World. For that you had to go to the wilderness where robbers lurked and dangerous beasts roamed – a place that symbolized everything that was wrong and deadly with this world, because that was the place, logically enough if you think about it, from which God launched his final push to defeat the chaos of evil and usher back in the cosmos of his original good creation.

In Advent, as in most any time of year, it's easy for us to have the wrong focus, to look to the wrong things. Even the manger scene has taken on so much glitter that we forget sometimes that Jesus' birth also took place out in the middle of nowhere, at a time when everyone else in the Empire was paying far more attention to the movers and shakers elsewhere than to anything happening out in a barn somewhere.

As Advent takes us along the road to Bethlehem, with John's preaching ringing in our ears, may our gaze be re-directed, and our feet as well, to those places where we need to be to prepare the way of the One who will take all that is crooked and rough in us and will make it straight and smooth and right and full of shalom.