

## The Song of Advent

(Luke 3:1-6)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
The Second Sunday of Advent, December 9, 2018

In the name of the one God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.

Throughout my life music has always been very important. I was born into a family in which both parents at one point in time sang in the church choir, and for about 30 years my father served as organist for several congregations. Together they owned a sizeable record collection, running the gamut from the Beatles to Brahms and light pop to classical organ. Music was always playing in the house; Mom enjoyed her James Taylor and Neil Diamond and Carly Simon during the day, and Dad tended to listen to his classical albums on weekends and occasionally during our Sunday lunches.

Because music has been so deeply rooted within me there are many times when I read a particular passage or phrase somewhere and it instantly triggers a lyric or tune. Today's passage from Luke is one of those times when words are the switch that turns on the music. On one hand the first part of the recollection of Isaiah's words – "Prepare the way of the Lord" – brings to mind the actor David Haskell performing the song based on those words from the beginning of the musical "Godspell." And then there are the later verses beginning with "Every valley" that immediately connect me to the music of Handel and the words of the famous tenor aria from "Messiah."

In a certain way, even beyond reminding me of particular pieces of music, I view the passage from Luke as being almost lyrical ... a song sung by one prophet, Isaiah, and (if I may borrow a musical term) sampled in the song now being sung by John. The inspired words of the prophets, like any powerful or emotional piece of music, drew people's attention. They got them to sit up and take notice. They called them to look toward something that was coming. Undoubtedly they evoked a wide range of emotions.

And they alerted the people to be watchful ... and to wait.

Last week the theme of my sermon was waiting – specifically, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "being able to wait."<sup>1</sup> It is no secret that that is the central theme of this time. During the first Advent season more than 2,000 years ago, the people of Israel had already been waiting ... and waiting ... and waiting. Their wait for the promised Messiah had extended back for generations, and despite waiting patiently they surely wondered ***when*** if ***ever*** their

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<sup>1</sup> "Sermon on Revelation 3:20, First Sunday in Advent, December 2, 1928." *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 10: Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931*, p. 542.

patience would be rewarded. Now, in this passage from Luke, we see a pivot point, the moment when things changed.

The wait was drawing to a close; the arrival was now imminent; it was time for “urgent action.”<sup>2</sup> Simply waiting in and of itself was no longer enough. As they were to witness in the prophetic ministry of John and be reminded of in the words of Isaiah, the people of Israel were now tasked with not just *sitting*, but rising up and *doing*. The song of old now had a new verse: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”<sup>3</sup>

Advent is itself a busy time of year. There are preparations for the multiple worship services throughout the month in which we will welcome friend and stranger alike. There are dinners to plan. Lengthy shopping lists call out to us to be completed. Perhaps there are final year-end contributions or gifts we must still make. We may even find ourselves at random moments reflecting on all those things we wanted to do over the course of the year and did not get to, and now we are trying to finish them all so we can feel a sense of accomplishment.

But today, on this second Sunday of Advent, we have the first appearance of the adult John – and he will ask something completely different of us. “He interrupts our schedules and demands that preparations of a different type be made.”<sup>4</sup> As he did with those who heard him all those centuries ago, John is calling for our repentance – essentially, a call to reorient ourselves.<sup>5</sup> For this one man crying out to us from the bleak and barren wilderness, the call to us was one urging us to turn away from sin and back to God. We are being challenged to eliminate the crooked roads, valleys and peaks to make it much easier for God to enter our lives and dwell in our hearts.

In this season, however, it does not necessarily have to be sin from which people are called to turn. It could be turning back to a friend or family member we have been avoiding in order to take a first step in healing a wounded relationship. Perhaps we are being called to turn to someone who is suffering in the world and from whom until now we have turned away – responding to others in the world crying out from their own personal wilderness. Perhaps our hearts are blocked by long-lasting anger or pain or grief of some sort, feelings they are holding on to so tightly that there is no room for God to come in or for the Holy Spirit to move through us.

Our lives are our songs, and I pray the words of Isaiah and the call of John inspire us all to this reorientation – to cast aside brokenness or grief or pain, dropping those things in our arms that allow us to embrace the God who is reaching out to us. I pray we are inspired to add new verses or come up with a better tune.

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Wright. *Luke for Everyone*, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:4 (NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> Kathy Beach-Verhey, “Luke 3:1-6: Homiletical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Beach-Verhey, p. 46.

Yes, we will spend time struggling with what we write, battling mightily against the valleys, mountains and crooked roads of our lives. But even as important as it is that we try to overcome these obstacles, we should not forget them. They are important parts of our personal and spiritual journeys. They are the raw material God seizes, reshapes and builds upon. They are the notes our creator uses to shape our songs.

And no matter how flawed the lines, the prophets and all who come before continue to remind us that it is God who writes the everlasting refrain: "All flesh shall see the salvation of God."<sup>6</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 3:6 (NRSV).