

12-5-21
Advent 2
Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 3:1-6

A Voice in the Wilderness

Any of you whose travels have ever taken you through Chattanooga know that it seems there is always a road under construction there. At least a couple of interstates run through there and several important regional highways, so I guess there is always a need for improvement. If you've headed through there on the way to the mountains or some other destination, most of us have learned to allow for extra time. The running joke used to be that Chattanooga is an old Cherokee word that means "Road under construction!"

Sometimes our spiritual journey seems to be a lot like that road around Horseshoe Bend. We spend a lot of time sitting and waiting. Then we spend a lot of time trying to catch up. The road to the peace and security we all seek seems to be filled with obstacles, and we wonder if we'll ever arrive where we want to be.

People who went out to hear this strange preacher we call John the Baptist had been journeying down roads that seemed to be filled with all kinds of obstacles for generations. Waiting was something they had learned to live with. They had waited before. Waited for a way to live at peace with themselves, with one another, and with God.

It all started with Abraham and a simple command: Follow me. Not a lot of rules. Not a detailed systematic theology. Just follow me, and I will make you the father of a great nation. More than the stars in the skies, and this promise to a man and his wife who were nearly a hundred years old. But the great nation came. And then all those people became slaves in Egypt, and it seemed

all was lost. You know that story, too. God raised up another leader, Moses this time. And those who had been slaves were free, and they heard yet another promise. That great nation God had made of them would now have a home, a place of their own. Then came a long journey to arrive there, a journey with all kinds of complications along the way. Also on the journey, God's people received the Law. Ten simple-sounding commandments that would set them apart from other people, ways to live that would show the world what God could do with people who were committed to him. But those ten simple sounding words brought obstacles of their own. Even while Moses was on the mountain with God learning how to tell the people about this new gift, the people were demonstrating that they couldn't or wouldn't comply with them. And so began a journey down a road that would be under construction for generations, a road that would lead people out into the desert again, this time to hear this strange preacher with a call to repentance.

Somewhere along the way, those people began to hear from Prophets and teachers that their road would not always be hard to travel, that one day God would send one to be among them to show them a smoother way, a way that led directly to God. Many had come with words of hope, but none of them turned out to be the one they were looking for. Many who went out to hear John thought maybe he was the one. We'll hear some of what they heard from him both today and next Sunday. The first thing we note about John is that people went out to hear him. He was not a leader of the Temple, though his father, Zechariah had been. But John traveled his own road and it led him to the desert where he could find his way without all the distractions and obstacles of the culture and systems that had come to offer less and less promise. Second, we hear the Word he preached. John came calling people to repent, and to prepare for the One who was coming after him.

Repentance is always connected to John and his preaching. All was not well, and John knew that something had to change. What had to change was the hearts of those people who

had been frustrated in their attempts to find peace and hope for too long. His call for change led many to believe that he was the One for whom they were waiting. We'll hear more about that next Sunday, but today we focus on why they thought so.

Long before John went to the desert, long before people came there to hear what he had to say, people like Isaiah had told people about the One who was coming. Isaiah even spoke of the one who would come to prepare the way for him. Isaiah said he would be like a voice crying out in the wilderness, calling people to prepare the way of the Lord, to make the pathway to God easier, not more difficult to travel.

To repent is to change, literally to turn and go in a new direction. If we expressed it in highway sign terminology, it would be a U-turn sign. If you've ever used any of the navigation devices that talk to you to tell you how to get somewhere, you know how easy it is to frustrate that voice on the phone when we don't follow its directions. Sometimes we get so far off course that all that voice can offer us is a direction to make an immediate U-turn and go back to a place where we've been before and start over. That's an oversimplified way to think about John's call. God has sent plenty of information to keep us on the right track, but we have failed to follow. So now John comes as that voice on Waze or whatever navigation program you use saying, "Make an immediate U-turn and go back to that place when God called you to follow, and let's start over."

It turns out that John was not the One people had been looking for. His job was more like that voice on the phone; his job was to get us ready for the One who is coming. In order to be ready, something had to change, and that something was us.

Repentance continues to be an important step on our journey toward peace and contentment. It is not the last step in that journey. Too often we hear that if we'll just repent, if we'll just turn from whatever it is that separates us from God, then we'll be on the right path, and all will be well. How'd that work out in your life? I thought so. Sort of like it did in mine and in everyone else's.

John called people to be baptized as a sign of their intention to be and to do something different. That repentance and the baptism that was its sign were not the end of the journey, they were a step along the way. The way would continue throughout our lives. When we gathered to baptize Cole and Avery a couple of weeks ago, we didn't just douse them with water and send them out to do the best they can. Their baptism, like yours and mine, was a new beginning, a time for them to tell all of us that they want to be on the same journey we are, and that we need one another's help along the way.

I've never done road construction work. And any who travel the highways are thankful. Just up the road from the ongoing construction that is Chattanooga is Nashville. I remember traveling through there for years when what we now know as I-440 was being built. Big flyover highways above roads that had been there for years. When that construction was going on, it seemed that those highways were going higher and higher and that they couldn't possibly connect to anything. But now we travel over and under them without giving them a thought. Those who can engineer such things amaze me. It's engineering of a similar sense that we are called to experience as we travel this highway that leads us to God. To repent and to turn to God is not the end of our journey. We who have been on that road for any time at all know that there are still obstacles along the way, some of our own making and some that get thrown up by others. And we must find ways to navigate those obstacles if we ever hope to get where we're going.

The word that John preached was directed at all who came to hear him. We often think of all those frustrated people who had made sacrifice after sacrifice, celebrated festival after festival, tried as hard as they could to keep the Law, even after it got codified and much more complicated than those Ten Commandments God originally gave, people who had done all those things and plenty of other things expected of them and still found themselves no closer to their goal of peace and assurance that God loved them than they had been before. Those people

are all important. They sound a lot like us sometimes. But one of those people who came out into the desert to hear John preach was Jesus. Jesus had heard all the same promises all those other people and the generations of those who came before them had heard. He, too, was waiting.

We don't know a lot about who many of those people were. No one took roll. But we know one of them must have been Jesus because it won't be much longer in Luke's account of all this that we read that Jesus came to John to be baptized. You'll hear that story after Christmas. You know that Jesus showed up along with others and asked John to baptize him.

Just as our baptism, whether it comes to before we have anything to say about it as children or we experience it as a conscious part of our profession of faith—however that happens to us, it comes with a call to do something, to be something. When we stop to consider what our baptism means, it means that we are part of a community like this one, people who are trying to do what God calls us to do.

There must have been something in what Jesus heard from John that stirred something that had always been in him. You probably remember the story of the time Jesus' parents took him to the Temple when he was twelve. They lost him and finally found him sitting with the elders talking about God's Word and what it means. This thing that John stirred up in Jesus was already there. It was with that Child in the manger we will greet in a few weeks. But it had to be nurtured and cared into maturity. So when Jesus joined all those others to listen to this voice in the wilderness, that something deep within him began to stir, and he knew that it was time. It was his time. When you hear that part of the story in January, it won't be long after that before we are off to the races, trying to keep up with Jesus as he sets out to do what God called him to do, to make a way for you and me and for everyone who has ever lived or ever will live to find our way to God and to the peace he wants us to know.

Most of you keep coming back into this room week after week. There is something about the Word you hear here that

stirs something that is already in you and helps you to believe that things can be different, that you can be different. That we can be signs of God's love and presence that others can see and decide they want what we have. Peace. Contentment. Joy.

John's voice still speaks. It continues to call us to repent, regardless of how many times we have. The call still comes, to turn from what's not working, to turn to God and to help others travel a road with fewer obstacles, a road that leads by this Font and this Table, a road that leads us to do things we didn't know we could do. We can't on our own. But with Jesus on that road with us, even Chattanooga can't slow us down for long.

The goal of our travel is not just smooth travels. The goal is that all of us, all flesh will see the salvation of God. Wherever you are on that road, take the next step, and then the next one. Watch obstacles fall out of your way. Climb mountains that have been made low. Journey through valleys that have been lifted up. Find your way to God's peace. It really is where you want to go. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Loving God, the gift of prayer offers us many benefits. We find peace in our prayers. We find direction. Sometimes we even find ways to hold one another in our hearts and to journey together. For this we give you thanks, and in this hope we offer you today's prayers. Hear our prayers, Good Lord.

We pray for the leaders and the people of every nation on earth. For those who live alongside us here, but also for those who live in much different ways in much different places. Help us to know more about one another so that we can understand one another and work together even while we remain different in many ways. We pray for the Church and all in it who serve you. For pastors and teachers, for elders, for members of committees who do largely unrecognized and unthanked works. For church staff people who print bulletins and clean up our messes and keep our children and deposit our offerings and work alongside us in many

ways. For all who work and serve in the Church, we offer prayers for strength and peace.

We pray for all who suffer illness and sorrow and affliction of mind or heart or body. We pray especially for those who are alone in this season. For the people who drive by here on Tuesdays to get a meal to lighten their load a bit and for those who tell others so their load can be lighter, too. We pray for the five churches who partner with us in this important ministry and for all the Churches who, with us, continue to contribute to MICA so that people in our community don't have to be hungry.

We pray for refugees who can't go home and for places that receive them and help them begin again. We pray for all who are far away from home, that someone will reach out to them and offer them a smooth road that goes a new way.

We pray for people in prison, that they might hear your Word and find hope and change the course of their lives. We pray for those who will never leave those places, that they, too, might find peace and be made new and whole.

We pray for all who sit in the dark places of life, for those who face death and for those who face it with them. Help us to bring comfort when we can and to offer peace and light in their darkness.

We pray for ourselves and for those with whom we share life and love. As we hear new distressing work about virus variants, guide us to responsible way to care for ourselves and for one another.

Keep us safe, Good Lord. Keep us from fear.

Gracious God, for all these and for all the others for whom we pray, this is our prayer: that your love will flow into their lives in ways they can know, that the mountains they must climb might be made low and that the valleys through which they must travel might be lifted up. In your Church, in our community, in all the world, help us to find the compassion of Christ to strengthen us and guide us while we wait for you to come. Come, Lord Jesus, for we pray all these things in your name. Amen.

