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“Prepare Ye”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

2nd Sunday of Advent (Year C)

December 6, 2015

Malachi 3:1–4; Luke 1:68–79; Luke 3:1–6

Emperor Tiberius starts out as an okay Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

But in his last ten years of office, he becomes a tyrannical recluse,
amassing treasures and great fortunes in his own villas
while inflicting random acts of torture and cruelty upon citizens in his charge.

Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, is not a bad person particularly,
but he certainly is not interested in ruling judiciously over the Jewish state.

He is the one who will wash his hands of Jesus and hand him over
as an innocent man to Jewish authorities to be lynched
while he occupies his time with more serious matters.

Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, will play a role in the execution
of both John the Baptist and Jesus in the coming years:

John for protesting his divorce of his first wife in order to marry
the ex-wife of his half-brother, and Jesus for his inability to perform miracles
on command, for which he turns him over to Pilate for final adjudication.

And then there are the Jewish priests, **Annas and Caiaphas**, the dastardly duo,
who in Jesus Christ Superstar sneer and snarl like dogs in the lowest of voice,

“We need a more permanent solution to our problem,”
meaning, “this Jesus must die!”

Into this political wasteland devoid of good will or peace, comfort or joy,
 the word of the Lord comes as it did once before in the troubled times of Isaiah.
Into these badlands of crooked leadership, *the word of the Lord comes* to John,
 son of Zechariah, the priest, like fresh air to the fainting.
And John, the messenger of the Lord, justifiably could have used his own voice
 to declare a season of resistance, a season of opposition, a season of violence,
a season of overthrow of oppressive political and ecclesial systems
 surrounding him, if he had chosen to use his own words.
But these were not his words; they are the words given to him by the Lord
 to proclaim good news to the people of God languishing in the wilderness.
And when John opens his mouth, words like baptismal cleansing,
 repentance, and forgiveness of sins fall from his lips.
Perhaps he himself is surprised by the strange words coming out of his mouth;
 perhaps he wants to pick them up, stuff them back in, and swallow them.
But they flow out, nevertheless, *these words of the Lord*;
 like steams in the desert, they flow out of his mouth:
"Prepare the people of God for the coming of the Messiah, John.
Shake up the comfortable! Urge them to attend to internal,
 personal housekeeping first, through introspection, reflection, confession,
 washing and cleansing from sin!
Then they will be prepared for the way of the Jesus, the way of suffering love,
 that **all humanity** just might witness God's salvation."
And thus, likewise, are we on target if we are shaken-up, disturbed, and discomfited
 as we enter into another season of Advent in preparation
 for the coming of God's Messiah into our lives,
 into our communities, and into the violent and unsettling politics of our day.

Thanksgiving is the one holiday when chances are optimal
 for all of my extended family to get together for a meal.

It doesn't seem much to ask, does it, considering that all of us live in North Carolina?

But it is all but impossible to pull everyone together for one family feast.

This year it was our turn to host in Durham, so I put out an invitation

early in November to my two brothers and to their children and grandchildren, as well as to our own children and grandchild, and to my relatively new in-laws, too.

If everyone had said yes, we could have had twenty-one around our tables.

One brother, however, had to pass, saying his family already had plans to spend

the holiday with his wife's people in Charlotte.

My other brother said that he would love to come, but asked if his daughter

could bring her dog, Penny Lane, with her for Thanksgiving.

Now I've never met Penny Lane in the flesh, but I have seen pictures of her

on Facebook. And while she looks like a nice enough dog, a rescue dog,

I also know from the pictures that she is a brindled pitbull.

I hesitated when he asked because frankly, I'm not wild

about having any dog in my house, but especially not a pitbull.

But I proffered a concession that it would be okay, perhaps,

if Penny could be confined to our screened back porch the whole time.

Well, that might be a deal breaker, he responded.

Penny is like his baby, and he won't go anywhere without her.

And I countered with my concern that I have a bird who would go coo-coo

with a dog in the house, and that we also will have two babies in the house.

The volatile nature of the mix just makes it too risky, I think. And we left it at that.

I felt bad afterwards that I could not be 100% hospitable for just one meal,

that my hospitality was conditional based upon factors that I could control.

And in light of John the Baptist's message, I have to confess that I was guilty

of pitbull profiling, which I could not seem to overcome.

And I wondered if my pitbull profiling was symbolic of other types of profiling

that I need to examine, confess, clean out, and repent of in John the Baptist fashion to prepare for the way for the coming Messiah in my own heart.

I attended a conference a few weeks ago

entitled "Being White, While Black Lives Matter."

We conferees were all lily-white, well-intentioned, good southern church people.

One of the presenters, Bob Zellner, was a freedom activist from LA (lower Alabama),

the son of a former KKK member who had denounced the clan and recycled his white Klan robe by cutting it up and using it for a church table cloth, saying that he was turning his sword into a plowshare.

At the conference, Zellner outlined what he called his "shriveled heart theory,"

claiming that fear and hate has corroded so many hearts from the inside out.

His prophetic call to us, lily-white, good church people, especially in the south,

is to quit stifling our empathy for hurt human beings,

to turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh,

and to take risks on behalf of the other,

and thus heal our own shriveled hearts.

His words struck me like fresh air to the fainting, in the same way John's

words resounded throughout the wilderness to the people of God.

My mind went immediately to the stories of Syrian refugees camped

out on the highway medians in Turkey,

for whom we collected blankets this month.

We grimace at one unkempt person holding a cardboard sign on a street corner.

Can you imagine the medians or shoulders of NC-147

being filled with families in tents with winter approaching?

I also thought of the story told by one young survivor of this latest

mass shooting in San Bernardino who said that her co-worker,

Shannon Johnson, wrapped his arms around her and said to her,

"I've got you," thus saving her life in the act of losing his.

Jesus stories, both of these: families fleeing violence and sacrifice of life for life.

How can we move from hearing stories to feeling stories

to engaging the people of the stories?

“Prepare ye the way of Jesus, the prophet says.

Remove detours from his path and others’ paths.

Level the field of dreams for everyone. Smooth out the speed bumps,
that **all people, starting with ourselves**, might have access
to God’s saving grace.”

Third century theologian Origen of Alexandria once said,

“I believe that the mystery of John still is being achieved in the world today.
If anyone is going to believe in Christ Jesus, John’s spirit and power
first come to his (or her soul) and ‘prepare a perfect people for the Lord’.
It makes the way in the heart’s rough places smooth, and straightens out its paths.”
(Origen, *Homilies on the Gospel of Luke* 4.6)

NY Times columnist David Brooks has based his recent book, *The Road to Character*,
on this John the Baptist premise, hearkening back to an older moral ecology
that he calls the “crooked timber” tradition, emphasizing our own brokenness.

“It was a tradition that demanded humility in the face of our own limitations,”
Brooks says, “that held that each of us has the power
to confront our own weaknesses, tackle our own sins,
and that in the course of this confrontation with ourselves, we build character.”
(Brooks, *The Road the Character*, p. xiv)

Twenty-first century theologian, Walter Brueggemann,

in his book *Reality, Grief and Hope*, claims that the prophetic task
throughout history is to counter the... ideology of *exceptionalism*:

The distorted view of... reality that breeds
... notions of entitlement, privilege, and superiority.

(Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief and Hope*, p. 33)

This attitude of exceptionalism, Brueggemann explains,

“depends upon insensitivity to the need, or even the presence of the neighbor.

The disregard of both God and neighbor permits
a predatory society to seem normal and acceptable.”
(Brueggemann, p. 35)

“So now the predatory society imagines it is free of God’s will
and free to cast off neighbor without a safety net.

And now while we watch, our society unravels.” (Brueggemann, p. 37)

I don’t want our society to unravel, do you? Or if it has begun to unravel,
or to petrify as crooked timber, or to shrink and shrivel in heart,
I want to do immediate CPR and revive it.

The good news is that the prophetic *word of the Lord* brings fresh, renewing
winds of change to the wilderness, brings new eyes to pitbull profilers,
brings cardiac care to those with shriveled hearts,
brings empathy for hurt human beings to the calloused,
brings straightened ways to the humbled and contrite,
brings courage and encouragement to the entitled to make amends
because, as John’s father, Zechariah, sang to his son as he rocked his cradle,
“the tender mercy of our God,” is near,
the tender mercy which will enable us to serve our God without fear,
“the tender mercy by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven,
to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the path of peace.” (Luke 1:78–79)

The prophetic *word of the Lord* calls us to humble ourselves
in imitation of the tender mercy and humility of God,
who, out of his great love and concern for hurting humankind,
came to earth to dwell among us in almost frightening
poverty and helplessness as a poor child.

The prophetic *word of the Lord* calls us to humble ourselves also
in imitation of Jesus, who did not aspire to the privilege of equality with God,

but who fashioned himself as a servant and as a servant leader,
humbling himself in obedience to the point of "this Jesus must die" (Phil. 2:6–8).

The good news coming out of the wilderness is this:

despite all shadowy appearances of darkness or death,
and regardless of the shoddy political or ecclesial state of the past or present,
the future good and fair governance of God is assured.

The fortify project paving the way to the Messiah is ongoing and will
conclude one day, providing unlimited access to God's saving grace.

And on that day, **all of humanity**, not just some of humanity, but all of humanity,
will experience the powerful peace of the Lord. Be prepared! Amen.