

Notes for Sermon on the Second Sunday of Advent at Faith, Okemos, December 5, 2021 based on Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius...the word of God came to John.

And in this first year of Joseph Biden's presidency....when Gretchen Whitmer is governor, Elissa Slotkin, our district 8 congressional representative, Debbie Stabenow and Gary Peters, our senators, Craig Satterlee, our synod bishop, and Elizabeth Eaton, our presiding bishop, the word of God still comes to us: comes to me, to Deb, to Bruce, to Chris, to Phylis here in this worship space and to all worshipping with us online.

To us now in this still beautiful, but lately too often also dangerous wilderness, in a country deeply divided over masks and vaccinations, in a violent world – filled with tragedies like that at Oxford High School, with unsettling threats of violence from a student at Holt Junior High, in a world infected by a wily, ever mutating virus, in a nation embroiled in heightened tensions over the fate of Roe v. Wade... to us in this violent, tension-fraught wilderness, the word of God still comes... It is a voice crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord....

It is a voice I so want my children to hear. I can see in the faces of our three children a pervasive weariness, both physical and psychological. I see and read and hear over and over the wide spread anxiety of a world more and more characterized by meanness and hardness of heart,

But to us the word of God has come, still comes, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The word of God calls us to an immersion, a deep and daily washing away of our sins and of the sins of the world...calls us to a baptism, acknowledging our need and earnest desire for a stirring in our hearts, for the mercy of God to save us, for God to save the people of Okemos, of Michigan, of the United States, of South Africa, of Namibia, to Syria, of Afghanistan, of Ukraine, of Germany, of Russia.

The word of God has come and is still coming to me, to Ellen, to Deb, to Bruce, to Phylis, and to you online. The word of God is calling us to a deliberate, repeated turning (the meaning of repentance) toward the mercy and kindness of God who is both our judge and our savior.

It is the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins that can raise us from this deep valley of darkness. It has the power to make tunnels through the otherwise insurmountable mountains of hatred and exploitation, of shame and disgrace. The gift of

repentance for the forgiveness of sins has the power to make the crooked straight and the rough ways smooth.

This word of God proclaiming the baptism of repentance spoken with fierce love can open the doors of our hearts to the presence of Christ like nothing else. And it is Christ Jesus who then works within us to eradicate, to burn away our hatreds and prejudices. It is then Jesus who through his own suffering and death and resurrection transforms our rigid, hardened hearts with God's forgiveness, God's compassion and mercy and kindness,

Our daily immersion in the waters of baptism, of repentance and forgiveness enables us to keep our eyes on the future, on the coming dawn that will follow a dark night, a day when all will see the salvation of God.

But know this: God's way to this future for us and for the whole world is the way of the cross. With Jesus we will suffer misunderstandings, yes, recurring hatred and rejection and abandonment along this way toward a more peaceful, harmonious, loving world... Yet though it is hard and painful, we will never walk this path alone. With Jesus, the valleys of death and darkness will be filled, the mountains brought low, the crooked paths made straight, the rough roads made smooth. With Jesus healing and wholeness will in God's time supplant hardened hearts and shattered relationships.

To be clear, we are not Jesus, that is, we are not the Savior of the world, let alone of our own selves. But when the word of God comes to us, we can be John the Baptist.

John's dad, Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit after the birth of his son, spoke these words to his son: *".....you child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

By the grace and power of God we can be John the Baptists. Because the word of God still comes to us, we can with bold love proclaim to our neighbors near and far God's tender compassion and mercy for them. In this wilderness of darkness, of division and disease, we can proclaim God's salvation for them, God's forgiveness for them, experienced over and over through the baptism of repentance, of turning their lives and hearts toward this most gracious and loving God. We can proclaim to them that God will guide their feet into the way of peace. Amen.

JDS