

The Messianic Tenor

A Sermon on Luke 3:1-7

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December 12, 2021



During Advent, my wife's cousins have been known to accuse each other of suffering from POPD. Not familiar with the term? The initials stand for Perfect Ornament Placement Disorder. Symptoms include extreme excitement in getting the Christmas Tree up the moment the Thanksgiving dishes are cleared; at least ten minutes of intense staring at the unadorned fir, visualizing the final reveal, before the crucial placement of the first ornament; immediate rejection of any ornament of a color or style inconsistent with the current year's chosen theme; sneaking out of bed in the middle of the night to move ornaments errantly placed by other family members; a stubborn refusal to allow any green gaps at all; and a competitive spirit upon seeing the Christmas trees of others.¹ In worst cases, tinsel is placed one icicle at a time.

Meg's cadre of cousins now are convinced that they are genetically cursed with POPD, except for Rick. He is the high school and college tennis star, who coached tennis throughout his teaching career and beyond into retirement. Rick posts that his preferred technique for decorating Christmas trees is lobbing ornaments from fifteen feet away.

When it come to holiday preparations, Presbyterian Pastor Kathy Beach-Verhey tells this family story about preparing for guests to arrive:

When I was a teenager, I used to tease my mother about some of her most particular preparations for company. She would get down on her hands and knees and comb the fringe of the oriental carpets in our living and dining rooms, so that there were no knots and the entire fringe was perfectly lined up... I tried to point out that one kick or shuffle of our guests' feet and the beautifully arranged fringe would all be in disarray again, but she would have nothing of my analysis. She wanted everything, down to the fringe on the carpet, to be perfect when we were preparing for guests.

Beach-Verhey continues:

The advent of guests prompts the host not only to straighten up, but also to fix things around the house – the broken doorknob, a loose towel rack, the burned-out light bulb, the leaky guest toilet. Preparing for company often causes the hosts to look at their

home, to examine their surroundings with a whole new perspective. Suddenly the countertops are too messy, the broken chair inadequate, the silverware too tarnished. Preparing for guests involves self-examination as much as it involves a “to-do” list.

She concludes:

John the Baptist does not seem like a character who would have likely understood all that is involved in welcoming company into our homes... But if John wasn't thoughtfully straightening rug fringes, he did understand how a people ought to welcome their God.ⁱⁱ

John the Baptist. According to Eastern Orthodox tradition, the last of the Old Covenant prophets. Jesus' eccentric cousin. The hermit-like character of the Judean wilderness, near the Dead Sea, by the Jordan River, clothed in rough hairy camel hide, living on locust and honey, full of fire and brimstone... A Facebook friend once messaged me a picture of John the Baptist -- uncombed hair, scruffy beard, brow furled, fiery eyes – with this seasonal greeting: “Happy Advent...you brood of vipers!” John the Baptist: not someone we would invite to nor enjoy having at a holiday party, let alone relish needing to clean up and decorate the house for.

Yet, every year, at this time of the year, we hear his haunting song:

Prepare ye, the way of the Lord!
Prepare ye, the way of the Lord!
Prepare ye, the way of the Lord!
Prepare ye, the way of the Lord!ⁱⁱⁱ

John the Baptist. The featured messianic tenor in Handel's *Messiah* and Stephen Swartz's *Godspell*. The biblical figure to whom the church turns annually on the Second Sunday of Advent, and two out of three years on the Third Sunday as well. Luke wants us to know all about him. The other three gospel writers? Not so much.

Matthew, Mark, and John downplay his role, limiting John the Baptist to two stories. The first is his sudden appearance to baptize Jesus (a task he is depicted as doing reluctantly given his unworthiness even to touch Jesus' sandal). The second is his reappearance, in jail awaiting his beheading, sending his disciples to ask if Jesus is the promised messiah. In effect, the other gospel writers play up Jesus' superiority by turning John the Baptist into a subordinate character...suggesting that, in the first century, John the Baptist actually was a populist, bigger-than-life, charismatic religious figure, with his own formidable following, competing with Jesus in the people's hearts and minds.

In contrast, Luke plays up the role of John the Baptist. The opening story in Luke's account is of the angel Gabriel appearing to an elderly priest, Zechariah, to announce that his barren wife Elizabeth will bear a child to be named John. Luke devotes 1½ times as much space to telling that story than he does to the parallel story of Gabriel's appearing to Mary and announcing she will give birth to Jesus (21 verses versus 13 verses). Then Luke spends 18 verses telling the story

of Mary (pregnant with Jesus), going to visit Elizabeth (pregnant with John the Baptist). Note, Mary goes to Elizabeth, not the other way around. And then Luke gives three times the space to telling the story of John the Baptist's birth (24 verses) compared to only 7 verses for the birth of Jesus. Those three John the Baptist stories do not appear in the other gospels.

Moreover, in the scriptures assigned for Advent, Luke takes great pains to introduce John the Baptist in the same manner as the greatest Hebrew prophets were introduced. Amos served as God's prophet during the reign of King Jeroboam (Amos 1:1). Isaiah declared God's word during the reigns of kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Is. 1:1) Jeremiah spoke for God during the reigns of kings Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah (Jer. 1:2-3). Luke alone tells us:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was the Governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness...

Luke does not list all those names and places because he loves detail. No, Luke wants us to know John the Baptist was the first prophet God had sent since Malachi, 400 years earlier; and that he was called to bring God's message to a people living in the realities of the complex world of politics and economics, militarism and commercialism, power and immorality, and the threat posed by the religious community's complicity with the Roman Empire.

- Tiberius, the self-proclaimed divine ruler of the empire, was able to send his armies at a moment's notice to squash dissent. In Luke's time, he was building a grand and beautiful city on the coast, designed primarily to extend Rome's power even farther. There was no way to get away from his reach.
- Pontius Pilate, able to sentence Jesus to death for the sake of expediency and false peace.
- The Herod family, conjoined to Roman power, brutal to any opposition, murdering their own family even to keep the throne, and willing to behead the opposition for the entertainment of the court.
- Lysanias is a mystery, but his Greek background, his family's connections to Cleopatra, indicate that his family was at the heart of the political and military intrigue that so often brought suffering to the population.
- And then there's Annas and Caiaphas, high priests from the ruling classes who had a stake in keeping the peace with the oppressor, and they were willing to sell out any voice that gave hope to those who were at the margins.^{iv}

Luke names the governmental and religious powerbrokers of his day, standing in the way of justice and mercy, goodness and righteousness, peace on earth and goodwill among all. Luke wants us to know that John the Baptist was not some oddball religious fanatic spouting off on some street corner, to be ignored and ridiculed. Rather, like all the real prophets of Hebrew scripture, John the Baptist was God’s messenger, bearing a word powerful enough to expose immorality, demand change, promise forgiveness, and call us to prepare for the advent of God.

Prepare the way of the Lord,
Make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
And every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

By the hundreds -- Jews and Gentles alike -- great crowds went out into the wilderness to hear God’s prophet speak. Some wondered if John the Baptist might be the Messiah, and followed him as disciples. All wondered what God wanted them to do...to which he told them not to presume that all was right between themselves and God, but to repent and to “bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

‘But what kind of fruit from us does God have in mind?’ they asked. The prophet did not mince words. He went straight from faith to works. He told them to share what they had with the poor. He told them not to enrich themselves to the detriment of others. He told them not to use their position or power to threaten or to lie or to bully. He told them to prepare for the One who is coming – the One who has the ultimate authority to judge our lives.

So, here we are on the 325th day of the Biden administration; when Nancy Pelosi is the Speaker of the House, and Mitch McConnell the Senate Minority Leader, and Amy Coney Barret the latest appointee to the Supreme Court, and J.B. Pritzker the governor of Illinois...

What paths do we need to straighten out? Which valleys are we called to fill in? Which mountains are we to bring down? What rough ways must we smooth out? What truth do we need to speak to power? What do we need to repent? Christmas is coming. Nothing can stop God’s coming. Each and every Advent, John the Baptist asks us: what fruit do we need to bear now if we are to be prepared to “see the salvation of God.”

ⁱ [Signs That You Suffer from P.O.P.D. \(theodysseyonline.com\)](http://theodysseyonline.com)

ⁱⁱ Bartlett, David and Barbara Brown Taylor (eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*. Westminster John Knox Press: 2009. Pages 45-47.

ⁱⁱⁱ Schwartz, Stephen. “Prepare Ye,” from *Godspell*. 1971.

^{iv} Schmeling, Bradley. https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003d37/getting_to_the_other_side. December 6, 2015.