

There's a lot of Old Testament to deal with this morning. Malachi warns of a refining fire, and Luke asks us to remember Isaiah... because of this fellow in the wilderness.

John the Baptist is a strange figure with a strange back-story. His father, Zechariah, had visions that left him speechless. John's mother Elizabeth is related to Mary – Jesus' mom - and these two women, each pregnant in unusual circumstances, offer support to one another. John's historical context is very clearly described – just in case we want to believe that the timing of these two remarkable births is mere coincidence. John appears, like any prophet worth listening to, when the need is greatest, and the time is just right.

And what a prophet! Calling for repentance – offering to wash people clean by baptism – his strange appearance (and his shockingly direct manner of speech – more on that next week) draw crowds of curious people to his river side pulpit. And the author of the gospel is more than curious; he is hopeful. Here surely is the one Isaiah spoke about! Here is the one who heralds the new kingdom – the time of God's favour – the imminent arrival of God's anointed...

John is one of my favourites – he's like a shooting star; sudden and blazing, demanding attention. He's like the bulldozer that clears the rubble away before a new road is built. He's raw and honest with no time for subtlety, and we see more of him this Advent season that we see of Jesus – for good reason. John is the 'prophet of preparation.'

Our preparations this year have felt more urgent and happened with some suddenness (or so it seems to me.) After a long and challenging time; after a Christmas with few decorations (and no 'live' worship here at St John's), this season seems to be tumbling down on us all at once. Lights and music – people in the sanctuary – Malachi's words seem apt:

“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.”

But of course, Malachi's 'good news' came with a warning too, just as John's appearance offers a caution. There are obstacles to be eliminated – the crooked must be made straight and the rough places made smooth – and I find myself wondering about these words of warning.

***Aren't they already accomplished?***

***Hasn't Messiah been revealed?***

***Indeed, doesn't John point to Jesus and say "there he is!"***

It seems to me that these words of warning – this prophet of preparation – applies even more accurately to our time and our lives.

We lurch from rough place to rough place these days. Challenges, like mountains, appear in the mist and loom large before us. And John, with his prophetic partners, continue to remind us of the work that must be done to navigate and overcome these challenges.

Prophets are **NOT** given to clearing the way themselves – they call us to the hard work of road-building. And while we are not responsible for the redemption of the world (that's God's work) we are, like John, given the chance to point to the signs that God is near, and (rage) at the people and things that threaten to keep us from recognizing the true nature and purpose of the anointed One.

Voices of hope can be hard to find. Whether in ancient times or in today's headlines, you have to read carefully – you have to listen with your ears tuned to hope – otherwise, we settle on the path that seems familiar; we cling to the words that tell us what we want to hear. But prophets don't pander to our desires. Malachi, Isaiah, John – even Jesus, in his turn – rarely tell us what we want to hear. Refining fire doesn't sound like the sort of thing we would welcome...unless it singes our opponents and brings them around to our way of thinking. Crooked paths are more scenic, aren't they? Mountains are meant to inspire awe, why would they need to be 'made low?' Yet the prophets of preparation warn that we have been seeing things, not as they are, but as we wish they were. And the time for that is over.

Calling to faithless and faithful alike, John and his predecessors remind us that God follows a different pattern than the one we have insisted was Gods. God's schedule is not predictable – God's methods are not easily understood – and now is as good a time as any to grow out of our old ideas.

Those old ideas represent the biggest challenge to the coming revelation of God's grace and glory. Thoughts of 'kings and kingdoms as they always were (**only better**)' are no help to us, for our King and Lord will arrive as a powerless infant, and he will speak truth to earthly power until that (so-called) power has him killed.

The hope in all this is that God decides to be present in the midst of these challenges. God does not hide from us; we just need to be reminded what to look for. John reminds us. Malachi reminds us. Isaiah reminds us. All of our hymns and habits around Advent and Christmas ought to remind us that the God, whom we seek, has already been made known to us.

The hard work is already done. The crooked ways are straightened – the obstacles have been removed. Now, let us tune our hearts to the work of peace that is the sure sign of 'Emmanuel' – God with us.