



Come, Lord Jesus



A Sermon By
The Rev. Gayle Fisher-Stewart

The Second Sunday of Advent
December 6, 2015

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Luke 3:1-6

On this second Sunday of Advent in the seventh year of the presidency of Barack Obama, when Donald Trump is the leader of the republican candidates vying for the office of the presidency, and the hate and vitriol that masks as political rhetoric by some of those who covet the highest position this country has to offer is constantly making the news. When French president Hollande has hosted leaders from around the world to discuss and perhaps collaborate on how to manage climate change. This in the aftermath of a terrorist attack on his people and we pray that the French people -- a secular nation -- in wanting to exact revenge, are called back to God who says, "vengeance is mine."

As we look at the chaos that surrounds us, as we watch as Turkey shoots down a Russian fighter jet, praying that Russia does not retaliate and plunge the world into yet another war.

We take all this in and LaQuan McDonald is dead, somehow he posed a threat to the police officer who murdered him. LaQuan was walking away from the police officer who allegedly feared for his life. LaQuan was shot in the back because his presence somehow threatened the police officer. But then we have a white man -- a domestic terrorist -- who shoots 11 and 3 are dead, to include a police officer and yet he is alive, he does not pose a threat to the officers who arrived on the scene. They were not afraid of him, they chose to talk him down, but not LaQuan, not Michael Brown, not Tamir Rice, not all the others who have died at the hands of an American system of policing that has lost its moral compass. And still another mass shooting, this time in San Bernadino, CA. 355 mass shootings in this year alone, and the year is not over. Allegedly a terrorist attack --16 of God's people are dead -- to include those responsible --and 21 are wounded. The killed and the wounded simply went to work that day, a job where they helped people and now they are dead. And I cried when I heard the names of the alleged terrorists because I knew the sound of their names would only provide fuel for the hatred many in this country harbor against an entire group of people because of the actions of a few.

There is still no peace in the Middle East, and we can only join John who at the end of Revelation implores the message for this morning, "Come, Lord Jesus." Yes, Come, Lord Jesus, as we live into yet another Advent season

But why this litany -- this list of offenses against God and God's people? There is a reason -- as it was in the time of the writer of Luke, God's promises come to fulfillment within the context of physical history -- the history of a living people -- the history of the times experienced by real, breathing, living people. God took human form and entered into the messiness and craziness of the world at the time of his birth in a manger and today he enters into the messiness and craziness that goes for life in what we call, the real world. These are the times that call for the paths to be made straight, the valleys filled, the mountains and hills to be made low, the crooked to be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth. This is the time to do the heavy lifting -- the hard work

of filling, straightening, leveling, and smoothing to get our houses --- our lives in order to prepare to receive the Lord.

When John the Baptist arrived on the scene, Herod the Great had brutalized the people with his taxes, and his sons continued to be just as cruel. The people of Israel were ripe for change, longing for God to once again deliver God's people and set them free from the yoke of oppression. As we listen to John this morning, we, the people of God are ripe for a change, to be freed from the oppression of the evil that surrounds us.

It was in this historical setting of John that God spoke again. Israel had been waiting for God to speak again for 700 years and so Luke announces "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah." John the Baptist is proclaiming the triumphal return of the presence of God among the people of God. God is still speaking to us today. The United Church of Christ has a campaign in which the mantra is "God is still speaking" which reminds us that God still has a lot more to say and we need to get ready to hear it. And so this voice in the wilderness, back then, which cried out for the way of God to be prepared with relentless urgency is a voice that comes to us today through the eons, still calling us to urgency as we live in the tension between the coming of the Christ child with the gift of salvation and the second coming of Christ with the promise of judgment. Prepare ye the way of the Lord because God is coming. Are you ready?

John is calling for repentance, calling for a radical change in how God's people live their lives. It is a call for metanoia, a change of heart. True repentance is literally to change one's mind, turn around, to reorient oneself. Reset the GPS, go in a different direction, a direction toward God. John calls the people to turn to God and away from sin – sin – anything that puts distance between God's people and God.

This voice in the wilderness cries out for the way of God to be prepared and that it be a priority for God's people; that it become number 1 on the list of things to do. And if we imagine ourselves listening to John back then or now, we are challenged to a different kind of preparation this season, not focused on decorating houses, buying presents and attending parties. Rather, it is a call for God's people to examine their lives, their values, and their priorities. If God's people are serious about preparing to receive the Prince of Peace at Christmas, they must be willing to go through the detailed preparation process just as they do when planning for company to come into our homes. John confronts us, commands our attention, and demands our response.

How can we prepare to receive the Prince of Peace and continue to live in a society where our young men are shot because of the color of their skin? How can we continue to live in a society where our schools do not educate and where there are still people who go to bed hungry? Where people live on the streets? Where violence against girls and women is acceptable? How can we continue to live in a society where guns proliferate and where there is little will to control access to them, but those same politicians who have the power to legislate common sense gun laws – or outlaw some guns all together -- have no problem attempting to control women's bodies?

Prepare the way this Advent, the prophet John cries out and he makes us uncomfortable but are we uncomfortable enough to truly repent and prepare for the coming of Jesus?

But in the midst of darkness, in the midst of what we might call evil -- there is always hope. There is always hope because hope showed up on the third day. Human beings do not have the last word, God has the last word. On the third day, Christ overcame sin and death and as a resurrection people, we live into that hope. That hope is the light that pierces the darkness, a darkness that comes even earlier this time of year. A darkness that is shattered with the birth of God incarnate in a stable, to a refugee family, to people who were marginalized by a world power. God enters the darkness and shatters it, takes on the human form and enters the messiness of human life to show us a better way – a better way that is grounded in love and selflessness.

When we see that love and selflessness, we see the light of Christ piercing the darkness. We see that light, we see that love and selflessness in the many who are doing the hard work of preparing the way, of making paths straight, making sure that the valleys are filled, the mountains and hills are made low, the crooked made straight, and the rough ways made smooth. This is no geography lesson – this is about getting rid of the obstacles that interfere with our relationship with God. And we see the light in the young people of the Black Lives Matter movement – the foot soldiers of the modern civil rights era who are challenging how the criminal justice system interacts with young African Americans.

We see the light in those who are willing to challenge the NRA and question, why, in particular people who follow a crucified and risen Lord need guns. Why is it that those who say they live in the shadow of the cross and are covered by the blood of the Lamb also need weapons of human destruction? Do they need a back up just in case the cross and the blood aren't enough?

We see the light in our young people – our young Episcopalians who are part of the young adult service corps working around the world and domestically – teaching and breaking down cultural barriers.

We see the light in those who are working relentlessly to end violence that is visited upon women and girls around the world.

We see the light in those who give the formerly incarcerated an opportunity to become employed reducing the possibility of recidivism.

We see the light in those who provide hundreds of millions of meals to those who would go without because of the circumstances of their lives.

We see the light in those who stood in the cold Friday night at the Muslim Community Center in Silver Spring – we stood in solidarity with our Muslim brothers and sisters and witnessed to the fact that they are not in this fight alone as they struggle against those who hate.

And let us not forget the members of this community – here at Grace – who provide a quality education to our young people, who through your work at Pennyworth are able to assist other agencies and organizations to help those in need, Shepherd's Table, A Wider Circle, your own homeless program which include the pets of the homeless, Habitat for Humanity, Heifer International, the Early Literacy Center at the Silver Spring Library, and others. You and your

work are shining examples of how it is to offer a light in the darkness and prepare the way for the Lord.

Yet, there is more, much more that needs to be done. There are many more paths that need to be straightened and it is then that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” There are those who must be reminded that there is a difference between what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” That there are those who believe that all one must do is “confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” But James reminds us that “faith without works is dead.” To prepare the way for the Lord requires work. God has given everything we need to do the work that is necessary. I am reminded of Frederick Douglass who said that for 20 years he prayed for his freedom and then one day, he remembered that God had given him feet. His prayer had already been answered, he just had to use what God had given him.

But sometimes to bring others on board, with this task we’ve been given, we must see the glass as half empty as opposed to half full. When the glass is half-full, it is all too easy to rest on the fact that others are doing the work or that most of the work is getting done. When seeing the glass as half empty, it is a constant reminder that there is more work to be done, that there is more to be done to prepare for the coming of the Lord. That we cannot rest until the kingdom of God is fulfilled at the last days.

You know, John the Baptist was an odd looking fellow, it is more than a notion to say that he was a little counter-cultural, dressed in animal skins and eating locusts, but if we are followers of Christ, we too, will look a little odd to those who don’t know or do not want to know the one who is coming. As we await the coming of the Christ child, let this be a season of counter-cultural preparation. Let us prepare as if our lives depended on it. Because they do.

John calls upon the church this morning to repent of its sins – sins of omission and commission-- and then to challenge the world to do the same. Today, the second Sunday of Advent, we must declare that same message of repentance as a first step on the road of becoming a just society, of becoming the beloved community, and recognizing God’s reign in our very midst. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.