

A great deal has taken place in these last few weeks, as we completed the year in Thanksgiving, AND in the next few weeks a great deal more will occur as we prepare for the coming of the Messiah. At one point I had a friend named Delores Williams who was a Black Woman Southern Presbyterian Pastor. Delores described that there is an essential link between Christ the King Sunday and Christmas in the Black Southern Church, which comes through Advent. The Preacher would cry out "WHO IS JESUS?" and on cue the Choir would sing "He is King of Kings, He is Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ, the first and last, no one works like him!" but then a solo would reply "Born in the Night Mary's Child a long way from your home, Born in the Night, Mary's Child, walk in our streets again." And Delores claimed that in that worship experience, on a Sunday morning, the Church did the heavy lifting of theology, affirming The Lord of Lords celebrated as conquering death at Easter/is Mary's boychild walking our streets again!

This morning, I invite us to follow up theological issue, personal to our time and place. A question that requires the same kind of heavy lifting, that in this technological, bureaucratic, commercial world, where there is so much fear and hate that 3 white men chased down, beat & killed a man because a stranger did not belong in their neighborhood; and where a black Actor made up a story claiming to be the victim of a hate crime, so he could get publicity; where a 15 year old went to 10th grade Civics and Geometry classes in Michigan and halfway through the day killed 4 and wounded 7 other persons; over against this reality for us to consider: What does it mean to Prepare the Way of the Lord?

Two weeks ago, after months of feeling safe, we cancelled the meeting of the Session because while we had been blessed to have avoided the brunt of the disease, so many of our leaders were now infected, and also the Pastor had Pneumonia. Rather than playing while the Cat was away, Our staff took their responsibility seriously, that this as a time to reset. We needed to stop all of our schedules. We needed to stop all interaction. We need to pray. Our Staff recognized, we now have the technological ability for believers to worship in their homes, and we would reassess where we were after Sunday. A new realization came to us: Thank God most have been Vaccinated and received Boosters that keep them from dying, but as "the church" our priority cannot be on how safe the strongest among us feel, but the weaknesses of our most vulnerable. Advent is a season of waiting, a season of resetting to God's calendar and God's time to be more aware of hosting others.

In Pima County we track mileage by kilometers and we are set on Mountain Standard Time: so it is now 10am, where those of you from the East Coast: on Eastern Standard Time it is now Noon, those from the Midwest: Central Time are at 11am, those from California: on Pacific Time have not yet hit 9am. One of the realities we have had to accommodate to, is that across Arizona the time zones never change. As we approach December 21st, the darkness of night begins earlier and extends later into the morning; but we claim CONTROL, that our world does not change. What we are called to consider this morning, what we have been called to every year on the second Sunday of Advent is: The Call to reset from our Reality to God's Shalom.

As 21st Century N. American Protestants, we hear the Hebrew word "shalom" and translate this simply as "peace be with you" much as we might say "God bless you" when a stranger sneezes, but Shalom means so much more. Shalom is "God's Peace and Righteousness," Shalom is a restoration of that balance that was the Garden of Eden at Creation blessed as VERY GOOD; Shalom is a reorientation of our world to God's priorities, in a reality where we are not in charge or in control.

Something there is which loves Luke's Audacity! While often identified as a Doctor for his understanding of anatomy; potentially an Attorney for his knowledge of the Law and Social conditions; possibly even

the Apostle Paul; Luke is also most intentionally an HISTORIAN. However, Luke is a 1st Century Historian, not a 21st Century one. Rather than basing the year on an abstract number, with a 12 month calendar; a 1st Century historian would identify historical events within the context of who had power and control of world events.

When Jesus was born, Luke identified Augustus was the Roman Caesar, Quirinius the Governor of Syria. Thirty-some years have passed, by our dating; instead, Luke now describes this as the 15th year of Emperor Tiberius Caesar who had proclaimed himself: by virtue of being Ruler of the Roman Empire: as GOD. Different from any government before them, under the Caesars, a free citizen of Rome could travel where ever they chose in the world knowing that the Legions of Rome would protect them. A weapon of Caesar was Pontius Pilate, military conqueror, who was given all Judea and Jerusalem to rule, with the power of life and death over his subjects. The family of the Herod's, descended from the corrupt kings of Israel, always attempting to curry favor with Rome; murdering their own family to secure being a puppet king, beheading any opposition for the entertainment of the Court. One brother as Ruler of Galilee, one brother as Ruler of Iran and Iraq; the third as ruler of Arabia. All while Annas and Caiaphas were the Highpriests in the Temple. How much more rich a context than in the year 33 AD.

Against this context of cultural, military, governmental, religious power, Luke describes John the Baptist. John was a no-body. The orphaned son of the old priest Zechariah, John had grown up in the desert, listening to the Wind, talking to Cacti and Lizards.

This is typical of Luke, describing the Word of God came to a couple beyond an age of hope.

The Word of God came to Mary, an unwed, illiterate teenaged mother, with no power or influence.

Jesus was born to Mary, a long way from their home.

The Word of God had come to nomadic shepherds at the bottom of the social scale. Luke affirms that as the world observes, there were those possessing all power and authority, who under threat of domination and death seemed to control the world; but the Word of God came to people more like you and me.

Stated bluntly: In the twenty-first year of the twenty-first century, when Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Nancy Pelosi and Mitch McConnell ruled the United States; Doug Ducey was Governor of Arizona; Francis was Pope of the Catholic Church; Craig and Diane were Pastors at Valley Presbyterian Church, the Word of God came to you in this wilderness. AND WHAT is most important is that with that whole list, the WORD of the LORD came to us, and what the Word said, was: Prepare the Way of the Lord!

What intrigues me about John... like us, John lived in a world that appears to have lost vision of possibilities, settling for survival and easy answers. We have become so focused on being right, of being certain, going along with others, that we seem to be unwilling to make changes.

Yet John did not preach what people wanted to hear, his sermons were not particularly racy or spicy, he did not have an incredible choir. People were not going to worship because this is where they always had gone, nor convenient. People were walking 30 and 40 miles to hear John preach because he was preaching the Word of the Lord FOR THEIR LIVES.

People were not going to be entertained, or because it was fashionable; but because the Word John preached was AUTHENTIC.

AND the word preached in the desert was essentially a single word: PREPARE!

Recognize that Our headlines, and our daily lives are far far different from what we envision of Shalom, God's Peace and Righteousness. Therefore may we prepare for that different reality to come: PREPARE!