

## “Sing Gloria: and A Cantata”

2nd Sunday of Advent: 9 December 2018

Preaching Text: Luke 3:1-6

Salado UMC, Salado, Texas 76571

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“I would rather have written the hymns of Wesley’s  
than to have the fame of all the kings that ever sat on earth;  
it is more glorious, it has more power in it”

—Kenneth W. Osbeck,

(*101 Hymn Stories: The Inspiring True Stories Behind 101 Favorite Hymns*).

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Luke’s Gospel names eight people in the first two verses of chapter 3—an auspicious ancient world’s “who’s who.” The first seven names made the list because of the positions they occupied, beginning with Tiberius Caesar, the Emperor of Rome, the most powerful person in that day’s world, and ending with Annas and Caiaphas both religious leaders, Jewish high priests in Jerusalem. The eighth and last name on the list is unique because he had no position at all. His name was John (son of Zechariah), later known as John the Baptizer. The sole reason John’s name appears on the list is **because in Luke’s words: “the word of God came to John.” Hear the day’s lesson:**

**[3:1] In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was 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, [2] during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. [3] He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, [4] as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,**

**“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:**

**‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.**

**[5] 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;**

**[6] and all flesh shall see the salvation of God”** (Luke 3:1-6).

As difficult a time as readers always have with this text, what with trying to pronounce names like Trachonitis, Ituraea, and Lysanias, it vitally proclaims the Lord’s coming. Depending on your punctuation interests, we read the Isaiah text from which Luke quotes: “make the path straight in the wilderness.” Luke himself states that the wilderness is from where the voice is crying out. Isaiah 40:3 reads: “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’ ” Luke’s text reads: “*The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’* ”

For you, perhaps, where the biblical writers place their quotation marks makes slight difference, but in Isaiah the voice cries out to prepare the way of the LORD in the wilderness. Luke on the other hand suggests the voice itself is crying out from the wilderness. Either way, the wilderness is crucial to

sense how one prepares for the coming of the Lord, which, after all, is what Advent is all about anyway. Not only this, but the wilderness seems like an unlikely place for an unlikely voice to cry out to or for anything anyway! Originally, “the wilderness” or “desert” meant “a place of herding.”

The wilderness has largely negative associations in the Bible—especially in the Hebrew Bible. The wilderness is a place of hunger, thirst, depravation, haunted by deadly beasts—like the hyenas in “The Lion King.” The wilderness is where nomadic pirates and Israel’s enemies dwelt: the Arabs, the Midianites, and the Amalekites.

Yet, we do not lose all, because the wilderness is also a scene for spiritual renewal. Hagar, Moses, and Elijah, for example, each flee to the desert and meet Yahweh/God there. Jesus, too, has an intense spiritual experience as the temptation occurs in the desert/wilderness (see: Matthew 4:1 ff., Mark 1:12 ff., and Luke 4:1 ff.).

Does it matter today if the voice is crying in the wilderness or whether the path is to made straight in the wilderness? Probably not, but most of us do know that today’s Advents seem more wilderness oriented than they should. This wilderness image suggests: anywhere God shapes one’s spiritual life; then there is the wilderness. The wilderness is the crucible in which our most cherished faith-values develop.

Some time ago, I was at Half Price Books, where the store oddly prices most of the books at 50% off the cover price (duh?). As I perused a shelf of books, I pulled one down and thumbing through it, a piece of paper fell out and landed on the floor. I picked the piece of paper up and it was a list. The list read:

**Mom – stationary bicycle**

**Dad – recliner**

**Steve – Target gift card**

**Aimee’s teacher – Barnes and Noble gift card**

The list went on to ten or twelve names, but at the bottom was something most intriguing: “Don’t forget the elves!” Perhaps Santa’s list? “Don’t forget the elves!”

This “elfin” phrase might be a reminder to all of us that amongst all our wildernesses—jobs, shrinking retirement funds, increasing health insurance premiums, trouble with children, trouble with parents, trouble with the job . . . . This list of wilderness troubles reminds me of what Paul once wrote:

**beaten with rods . . . received a stoning . . . three times shipwrecked; adrift at sea; in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked . . . (2 Corinthians 11).**

Perhaps we are not the first to be up against such daunting circumstances. Perchance even here, we can find God—even in the wilderness. Despite all of this, still in our own personal wildernesses, the Half Price Book Christmas gift list’s final coda might be a most apt seasonal cue: “Don’t forget the elves!” Maybe these remembered elves prompt us as to why we do what we do. These elves may remind us who we are as part of a community of faith.

So . . . if for some reason this holiday season you keep thinking to yourself, “It sure doesn’t seem like Christmas,” do not worry. The great gift of Advent and Christmas is the gift of Christ which is none other than “the word of God made flesh.” Remember these words to encourage you when you are

feeling un-Christmassy: “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah *in the wilderness.*” Here is clearly an unexpectant voice from an unexpectant place. We will be singing “Gloria” because it is one of the blessed ways to express our faith. And . . . please . . . Don’t forget the elves! Amen.

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