



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

December 14, 2025; Advent 3A: [Isaiah 35:1-10](#), [James 5:7-10](#), [Matthew 11:2-11](#)

As we begin to prepare for next week's Christmas pageant. I find myself reflecting on my first visit to the Holy Land about thirty years ago. I had imagined Israel and Palestine as some sort of living Christmas pageant with a desert full of shepherds, rocks, and sand and things like that. I was amazed to discover a land of modern cities with a northern region full of green fields and groves of fruit trees. Even the barren rocky region around the Dead Sea was dotted with date palm plantations made green through irrigation. When I asked our tour guide about this, he smiled and with great pride said, "Yes, it's true. We have done so much. The prophecy has been fulfilled. The desert has bloomed like a rose." Our guide was a Palestinian Christian from Bethlehem named Gabriel. As Gabriel told his story, as he showed us the struggles of his family and his people, and as he shared the faith that kept them going through all of it, I realized that he was talking about more than palm trees. When he talked about the desert blooming, he was talking about himself.

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. Jesus called John the Baptist the greatest of prophets. Prophets like John the Baptist do not predict the future.

Prophets like John the Baptist hold up a mirror to the present, forcing people to look honestly at imperfections in themselves and their society, and see what needs to change. John recognized that both personal and political wildernesses exist. He understood that those wildernesses are precisely where God will come. He knows the message of Isaiah: that broken places – and broken people – are where the most beautiful of blooming will occur. To quote the words of Leonard Cohen:

Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.[1]

When John's disciples asked Jesus if he was the one they had been looking for, he didn't regale them with theological explanations or biblical quotes. He simply told them to tell what they have heard and seen. If they did that, they would know that Jesus was the Messiah and that the Christ of Christmas had come. So, what have you heard and seen?

As you are thinking, let me share just things that I have heard and seen that told me these things. Last Friday morning, it was the smile on a man's face. I saw through my office window wandering around the back yard of the church, looking for St. Luke's Health Fair. He hadn't had any health care for years and told me that he knew he could come here for help. On Friday afternoon, it was the image of six 1st grader friends of Casper Jenkins who brought rocks they had painted themselves to put in the memorial garden to honor Geoff Jenkins and support their friend. As people were leaving from Geoff's service, East Hampton High School students were coming in, getting Hoie Hall ready for Bonac Lights. That whole evening St Luke's was packed with the exuberant sounds of youth, even including the High School Band playing Christmas Carols on the patio. That same spirit continued on Saturday, throughout Santafest, the blessing of the village Christmas Tree, the assembly of our own Christmas tree, and exuberant singing of Christmas Carols at our Advent Dinner, complete with a special gift of Mexican hot chocolate from an immigrant family. Sunday saw the enthusiasm of volunteers climbing ladders to decorate the church and the joy of our own Mardee Gorman, sitting in her wheelchair placing characters in the manger. Equally moving were the tears on the faces of people gathered Sunday afternoon at the blessing of the Christmas tree for East End Hospice at Hook Mill.

On Monday, this all kept going when volunteers climbed to the top of the tower to hang a newly rewired star and still other volunteers delivered overflowing boxes of Angel Tree gift cards to the Retreat and to San Francisco in Riverhead on Tuesday. It kept going on Wednesday, when the clergy of the Peconic Deanery met here for lunch. Padre Luis, the new priest in Riverhead, was so moved by our support and by our willingness to listen to him in Spanish, that he left St. Luke's hugging everyone he saw. Other things I saw and heard this week include an office helper stuffing Christmas letters, parishioners going above and beyond to reach out and support one another, and me getting a phone call from Ruta 27 on Wednesday telling me that students who come here for English classes wanted to come and sing for this service today, the rectory filled with laughter on Thursday night as the St Luke's staff and their spouses gathered for our annual staff Christmas dinner and Yankee Swap and the sound of people singing along at a packed Christmas concert at the Whaler's church in Sag Harbor on Friday. If this public side of things sounds a little too much like a Hallmark Christmas movie, consider private moments no one else saw and heard, moments that happened sitting in parishioner's homes, by their hospital beds, and on the phone. These were times when people shared their suffering, the pain and grief, anger and anxiety, and fear and frustrations that they had held deep inside. They talked about caring for loved ones and family, about dealing with dysfunction and disease, about politics on the largest and most local of levels... and yet in all it coming back again and again to their faith and their church.

John's disciples asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." This week I saw valleys being raised up and mountains and hills brought low. This week I saw the desert bloom. Today is *Gaudete* or "Rose" Sunday. Rose Sunday reminds us that broken places – and broken people – are where the most beautiful of blooming will occur. Broken places - and broken people - are where we will experience God. *Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.* I would suggest that it is also how the light gets out as well.