

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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II Advent (Year C): Luke 3:1-6

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

Our Gospel lesson opens, “In the fiftieth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee...”²

Be clear this inscription does not recall the salad days³ of Jesus’ followers and the Jewish people. No, this dating points to the era of their low estate, including mention of the man who will execute their living Christ. Yet the authors of Luke locate the Gospel story in this unhappy time *to sow hope* – hope for others who suffer as they have suffered.

The litany underlines that a long and ignominious season portended the birth of Zechariah’s and Elizabeth’s son; not a glorious, but a *grievous* age anticipated John the Baptizer. Therefore, one should not read any given circumstance as a measure of either terrestrial possibilities or God’s concern. *Good things can come from hard times* – we don’t purposefully make life difficult to concoct that formula, yet we do seek to mine grace even from days as hard as stone.

John’s message reinforces this call to hopefulness. Hear how he preaches past his immediate condition: “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 [*shall be*] made smooth”⁴ ... *shall be*. See, *there is coming a time* when “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”⁵ Soon and very soon, not only will he and his people be saved by God’s goodness, but *all* people will be saved.

Recalling the words of the prophet Isaiah, the Baptizer urges his kindred’s reinterpretation of their present wilderness as a time of preparation: *Do not allow the lords of this world to determine your place in God’s realm! Instead, ready the way for our Lord, the one, true God. For no matter the difficulties before us in this moment, when we make straight Christ’s paths, we set ourselves on the high road of mercy, peace, and love – and we call all people to the same, to join us there.*

In our own day – during the fourth year of the reign of Joseph, when Maura governs the Commonwealth and Michele leads the City of Boston – the world trembles with wars and rumors of wars. A new administration stirs attention for itself, and a parade of the self-interested and the sycophantic blather before news cameras. Rising ocean levels overcome our coasts, fires consume our timberlands – and we could continue this grim catalogue for just as long as we like, looking no further than the front page of any morning’s *Globe*. Instead, John once more calls us to reappraise our present condition.

Today's appointment builds upon last week's apocalyptic text and Jesus' call for us to "be on guard"⁶ and to "be alert at all times."⁷ John also inspires readiness with the proclamation of "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."⁸ Next week, he will point to the axe lying at the root of the trees, sharpened to ravage any shoot that does not bear good fruit.⁹

While Isaiah, Jesus, and John, all intend to remind us of God's enduring Love and the agency for Good we maintain no matter our circumstances, between the world's thorns and thick cover, the glint of that blade and the approaching devastations, the wilderness can capture our attention – *confine* our attention – and keep us from the high road to which those prophets ultimately point.

I acknowledge that I am no stranger to wilderness worry, though I come by it honestly: my maternal grandmother was one of earth's all-time great worriers. Her husband, my grandfather, died when my mother was nine, and Granny¹⁰ had lived as a widow for nearly three decades by the time I was an adolescent. During those years, she took boarders into her home, both for the bit of extra income and, I suspect, for the company.

One of those boarders, Christy, is both a saint and a wonderful storyteller. Christy enjoyed telling all kinds of tales about my grandmother,¹¹ and she described an afternoon when Granny was away playing Bridge.¹² Christy arrived home from grad-school classes to find water all over the bathroom floor. She looked down to see her own footprints sunk deep into the mat that had been so thoroughly soaked.

When Granny returned, Christy asked if my grandmother was aware of some water in the bathroom. Granny confessed she knew no such a thing, and nervously began moving toward the scene. Easing back the shower doors, Granny asked, "Oh, Honey, do you think someone has broken in here to take a bath? *Get the iron skillet off the stove.*" Then, looking down at the rug, Granny exclaimed, "It looks like the intruder had very big feet!"

While Christy attempted to convince Granny about the footprints' origin, Granny insisted on checking the house. Christy, confirming her sainthood, agreed to trail Granny with the skillet in a cocked position as the pair checked in every closet and behind every door. Granny, down on all fours looking under the very-low-to-the-ground twin beds in my uncle's room, finally admitted, "Well, if anyone could fit under here, I suppose they couldn't hurt us too badly."

See, Granny filed the facts of that situation – of many situations – well behind her anxieties.¹³ Rationally,¹⁴ I am confident Granny could acknowledge that she, Christy, and that frying pan would have proven meek opposition for a trespasser mortally committed to a hot bath. No matter: "checking the house" had become an obsessive behavior – like playing the radio whenever she ran an errand, to present as though someone were still at home; like leaving notes from "Clay" on her carport door, short messages that promised he would be back any minute [presumably from the construction job that had built him into a formidable mass of a man, certainly fit to take on any would-be burglar who was thinking about entering that home]. These tactics had become more like incantations than essential safety procedures.

As concerns our Gospel, when our immediate wilderness [rather than that coming, high road] captures our attention, the prophets' intensity can lead us into *hypervigilance*. An unintended, collateral impact of their calls, many of us habituated degrees of hypervigilance during the pandemic's worst days.¹⁵ Dr. Google defines the condition as "preoccupation with possible unknown threats, constantly watching and scanning surroundings, [and] startling easily."¹⁶ Other medical sites add, "Hypervigilance is accompanied by a state of increased anxiety which can cause exhaustion"¹⁷ ... *can cause exhaustion* – yeah, no shipwreck, Captain.

Hypervigilance leads to a kind of internal police state: we evaluate every painful knot for cancer; we monitor every breath for anomaly; we measure every heartbeat for arrhythmia. Outside our bodies, we attend every detail of our environment, noting strangers and accounting the unexpected. We assign meaning and motive to every circumstance, not matter how benign. And, like my sweet Granny, we take up compulsive behaviors to help us deal with these oppressive anxieties. Maybe we run an a-fib test on our AppleWatch for reassurance we are not having a heart attack; or we tuck a hand in our purse to make sure our wallet and phone are still there; or we turn back a second – a third ... a fourth! – time to confirm we locked the house and blew out the candles on our Advent wreath.

The great lie of hypervigilance is that it is a cure for anxiety, rather than a cause ... *The great lie of hypervigilance is that it is a cure for anxiety, rather than a cause*. And the prophets mean to set us free from its demands, not to condemn us to its suffocating grip. Indeed, we and our communities must realize that if we commit all our waking attention to fretting (under a gauze of that "necessary surveillance" the bible told us to), then we will only become *more* anxious; *more* weary; and, fundamentally, *miserable* – I mean, really crummy company. **Friends, if we agonize our way to December 25, then only fear and worry will be born in that manger.**

Awaiting the birth of our infant King, we must resist our talismanic compulsions and devote ourselves instead to the hope and joy Christmas. And, like every discipline, that hope takes practice; that joy takes practice. I admit that the worrying comes easier for me. Even as I can rationally acknowledge anxious obsession makes a crooked path to the Christ child, I must consciously, deliberately endeavor the hope and joy until they come easy ... and they will.

For the truth is this: some of our neighbors do have big feet,¹⁸ and our bodies *are* imperfect (and getting more so every day). The world *can be* a dangerous place, where good people suffer undeservedly, and the mean-spirited prosper. We know the dadgum sun will eventually explode and end all life on this planet! All this is true ... but *these are not the only truths*.

Good things can come from hard times, and this season of Advent reminds us that in the midst of terror and tumult, our God remains *Goodness*. In the midst of fear and foreboding, our God remains *Grace*. In the midst of chaos and confusion, our God remains *Calm*. And in every season we choose Christ as the author of our salvation – not Herod or Pilate; not rogue bathers or rare cancer; not solar distress or cosmic instability – we look beyond the darkness and *into the light* ... and, by so doing, we begin to bear light ourselves.

Through the din, John still speaks to us: *Do not allow the lords of this world to determine your place in God's realm! Instead, ready the way for our Lord, the one, true God. For no matter the difficulties before us in this moment, when we make straight Christ's paths, we set ourselves on the high road of mercy, peace, and love – and we call all people to the same, to join us there.*¹⁹

Held in common by this hope,
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² Luke 3:1.

³ An expression borne of H.I. McDunnough and the Coen Brothers' inimitable *Raising Arizona* (1987).

⁴ Luke 3:5.

⁵ Luke 3:6.

⁶ Luke 21:34. "*Be on guard* so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly ..."

⁷ Luke 21:36. "*Be alert at all times*, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

⁸ Luke 3:3.

⁹ Luke 3:9. "Even now *the ax is lying at the root of the trees*; therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰ She wanted to be known as "Gran" – and insisted on signing all her holiday and birthday cards with that appellation – but we grandchildren all called her "Granny" without exception.

¹¹ Christy shared this story as part of her eulogy for Granny. Lord, have mercy: Christy was so kind to my grandmother during Granny's life, and such a grace to us after Granny died.

¹² With characters like "Mama June," Granny's Bridge club last almost 70 years.

¹³ While a Hall-of-Fame worrier, Granny also lived with incredible pluck. Not only did she figure out a life for herself and her children as a single mother in the 1960s, she put want ads in the *News-Star-World* for strangers to come and live in her home! Totally amazing.

¹⁴ Granny was a very sharp person. Her married name was "Albright," which she often explained to friends as appropriate, because, "Honey, all my family is just that: *all bright*."

¹⁵ And I preached a sermon on that related topic during those first months. In those days, I washed my hands like a madman ... I realize as much for reassurance as for hygiene.

¹⁶ From Dr. Google's medical colleague, [WebMD](#).

¹⁷ From [the Cleveland Clinic](#).

¹⁸ For leaving scary footprints in our soaking wet bath mats ...

¹⁹ Luke 3:5-6.