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Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-6

WHAT SHALL WE SEE?

When I bent over to pick up the newspaper in the driveway the last few mornings, it felt heavier than normal. I don't think it was just the additional ad inserts. I think it was the weight of the news itself. Just this week: new hints of public corruption, new numbers showing that even with a good national economy, poverty levels in Philadelphia are increasing, as well as a new study showing climate change inducing carbon dioxide levels increasing at frightening levels. This sanctuary is beautiful with its decorations for Advent and Christmas, but walk outside and rather than feeling as if we are living in a verdant garden, these past few days remind me more of something like a wilderness, where we would not see that which manifests fruitful growth and life. In this second week of Advent, a time of celebration of peace and hope that comes as we anticipate the birth of our Lord Jesus, we wonder whether peace and hope will end up being the relevant experiences for us in our time.

We heard in our reading from Luke's version of good news of one who was preparing the way for the coming of the Lord. The word gospel means good news. This gospel writer's practice at various points in the account was to place certain events in context by telling who was in charge at that time. At this point, Tiberius Caesar was on the throne in Rome. Luke tells us it was the fifteenth year of his reign, which would have been the year 29 of the Common Era. But Luke does more than say when certain events were happening. He continues to talk about who is in power, including figures devoted to Roman and personal dominance instead of the well-being of the people, including Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, and Lysanias. To get the mood that Luke wants to convey, let me just say that if there were music in the background for this listing of political figures, the music might be that which was played when Darth Vader first appears in a Star Wars movie. One would hope that there might be some religious leaders who would be standing up against the brutal, death-affirming

ways of the Roman leaders who had been listed, but instead, Luke's context-setting registry continues with the listing of high priests, Annas and Caiaphas, who showed themselves to be absolutely closed to anything that held the promise of being fresh and liberating.

Things in Luke look about as bleak as can be. But then, what are we told? We are told that the word of God came. The word of God - it did not come to any of those heavies who held great power. It did not originally show up in a location where world-altering decisions were typically made. Rather, it comes to someone who has no official position of power, someone named John. The word of God comes to him way out in the wilderness.

I'm reminded of the opening scene from the movie "Forrest Gump", when a white bird's feather is seen floating up in the sky, slowly descending as it swoops back and forth on the breeze of the wind. For a period of two minutes, it looks like the feather might land on one of the tall steeples or one of the impressive government buildings, but instead we finally see that the gentle wind is guiding it toward an unassuming man sitting at a bus stop. This man will end up being the movie's title character, a nobody who will end up being associated with all kinds of transformative events - the feather from above lands at his feet. ¹ In Luke's telling, it would be as if the feather had floated over Caesar's palace in Rome, then over various Roman imperial buildings in Palestine, floating above the temple in Jerusalem, before being whisked out into the wilderness where it lands at the feet of a rather odd character named John. The tools of his trade are not swords and armor and chariots. He does not wear the robed finery of a high priest. This is someone who draws crowds out into the wilderness, where with the waters of baptism, he will rinse away the grime of despair that sticks to them. He tells them that they need to turn away from the dead-end direction in which they had been headed.

What an unlikely person to be the vessel through which there would come a message of hope. What implausible instruments this man named John would use to convey a different kind of power. What a questionable location for a movement to begin that would maneuver past all that stood in the way of God's liberating spirit. And yet, why not the wilderness - a landscape where the people

would be reminded of God's caring provision when the Hebrew people had been delivered from slavery in Egypt, before they had yet to reach the Promised Land. Their eyes had indicated that there was no way for them to have the food and water they needed for an extended journey through the wilderness. Crops wouldn't grow there. Livestock couldn't make it there. They were stuck in a place that made it look like they might all die of thirst. But it was a place where they learned to look for manna and quail, where they found enough water for their needs day by day. They learned they could place their confidence in a trustworthy God. There had been no way that it looked to be possible that they as a people would have been liberated from slavery from the great military power of Egypt so long ago. Neither did it appear that they would do anything other than wither and die in the wilderness and yet, daily God made a way out of no way.

So with remembrance of what God had done years before, once again there is mention of a wilderness setting. And with an odd mouthpiece for the Word of God, it still comes. It comes saying that those who were feeling low, those who had been put down, those who had been stepped on who found themselves in a low valley would be lifted up. It comes saying that those who thought they were high and mighty would be brought to a more level place so that they too could see God's saving power. Those whose dealings for power were less than straightforward and those whose schemes made things rough instead of smooth would not end up being an impediment for the good and saving intentions God had. There was plenty of bad news around. The heavy names of Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, and even Annas and Caiaphas were a reminder of that bad news. But there was good news, God news, gospel that had come with a wing and a prayer that was yes, more robust, more enduring than the bad news.

You can see the origami peace cranes that have been folded and hung in the sanctuary and in the chapel. There is a children's story about a girl named Sadako Sasaki, who lived in Hiroshima at the time of the atomic bombing by the United States, a very destructive act, but one that helped bring World War II to a close. Sadako was two years old when the bomb exploded about a mile from her home. She was among those exposed to massive radiation. When she was twelve, she began to have troubling symptoms. Soon she was diagnosed with leukemia. The prognosis was that she had perhaps just a year to live. Her friend

told her to fold origami paper cranes in hope of making a thousand of them. She was inspired to do so by the Japanese legend that one who created a thousand paper cranes would be granted a wish. In the children's book retelling of her story, she managed to fold only 644 cranes before she became too weak to fold any more and died. Her friends and family helped finish her dream by folding the rest of the cranes, which were buried with Sadako.

However, the story is told in more than one way. Surviving family members claim Sadako exceeded her goal of 1000 cranes and the family in recent years has donated some of her cranes to important places in the world, like the 9-11 memorial in New York, the Pearl Harbor museum, and the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and Jerusalem. After her death, Sadako's friends raised funds to build a memorial to her and all of the children who had died from the effects of the atomic bomb. It is installed at the Hiroshima Peace Park. At the foot of the statue is a plaque that reads: "This is our cry. This is our prayer. Peace on Earth." ²

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" What might unfold if folded paper cranes dropped a feather that landed at our feet? Could there be good news, God news that comes on a wing and a prayer?

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7voy1vit6Y>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadako_and_the_Thousand_Paper_Cranes