

“Under Construction”

Malachi 3: 1-4, Luke 3: 1-6

Advent 2/C, December 9, 2012

Lynne M. Dolan

Have you ever thought, “this isn’t the way it’s supposed to be?”

Syria inching dangerously closer to the brink of chemical warfare isn’t the way it’s supposed to be. Politicians threatening to send millions of Americans over the fiscal cliff, isn’t the way it’s supposed to be. Celebrating Christmas without the family’s matriarch isn’t the way it’s supposed to be.

“This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be.”

There are some things we can change. There are some things we can not change. There are others that prompt *us* to change. We can not keep the Syrian leaders from perpetrating unspeakable harm upon their own people, but we can pray like crazy for peace. We can examine the ways we hinder peacemaking, in our lives and our communities. We can ask God to strengthen our commitment to eradicate prejudice and racism in our communities. We can’t stop the bombs from flying, but we can do something.

We can not go to Washington to enter into the tense negotiations regarding tax breaks and revenue shifting, but we can prepare ourselves to help those neighbors who may be affected by these decisions. We can pray like crazy that our leaders put aside their egos, need for control and sense of righteousness to find solutions that will minimize the strain for the most vulnerable in our country.

When we confess, “This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be,” we are saying two things. We acknowledge that something is not right. But we also recognize we have a vision of the way things ought to be. It is not enough to know things are not as they should be. Our faith leads us to do something to make a difference.

We don’t like to talk about sin, but that is where John the Baptist takes us this morning. He invites us to take a long, honest look at our lives. He was sent to prepare a way for Jesus. At the point in which we meet John, he is a grown man. He and Jesus were contemporaries. Remember Elizabeth and her pregnancy? Jesus and John were cousins and now they will be partners in a ministry that will change the world. This story takes place just as Jesus is preparing to begin his ministry. John’s calling was to prepare the people to receive the word of the Lord, the word made flesh that has come to dwell among us. John came offering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance feels so out of place during the Advent season. Ironically holly and jolliness doesn’t seem to fit with the work of self reflection and repentance. However, if we do not do this work, the holly and jolly is just an illusion that lasts no longer than the tree we adorn or the candles we light.

We prepare to receive the Christ Child anew by cleaning house. We de-clutter our spiritual dwellings. We acknowledge we are not prepared to receive the Holy One in our present condition. This is the work that should occupy our Advent time, not how many presents to give or whether the decorations are pleasing to our guests. “This is not the way it’s supposed to be,” and John calls us to do something about that condition.

In the Biblical tradition, the vision of how things ought to be is called *shalom*. We translate this word as “peace,” but it means much more than the absence of warfare or a calm state of mind. Rev. Joseph Pagano says “*Shalom* or peace in the scriptures means universal flourishing, wholeness, harmony, delight. The prophets spoke of a time when crookedness would be made straight, when rough places would be made smooth, when flowers would bloom in the desert, when weeping would cease, when the lion would lay down with the lamb, when the foolish would be made wise, when the wise would be made humble, when humans would beat their swords into ploughshares. All nature would be fruitful and benign, all nations sit down together for a sumptuous feast, and all creation would look to God, walk with God, and delight in God.”<sup>1</sup>

In the Bible, *shalom* or peace, is the way things are supposed to be. Peace is not something we simply hope for, it is a way of being. We are to become peacemakers. We pray as St. Francis did long ago, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.” Repentance precedes peacemaking. It is not enough to talk about change, not enough to make a list of our sins or failings. We must do something about them. Repentance is confession that leads to action. God prepares the way and when we decide to follow where God leads, God takes care of the rest.

The path is not always straight, or smooth or without obstacles. The road that leads to God’s *shalom* can be dangerous. John reminds us of the prophecy of Isaiah, “Prepare the way for the Lord, and make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation.” God partners with us to make the rough places smooth and the crooked places straight. Every time we challenge injustice, we smooth out a rough place. Every time we welcome the one who has been forgotten, we make the crooked straight.

This preparatory work takes place in the wilderness. This is where God calls us, away from the hustle and bustle, the agendas and cell phones and must do’s. The act of repentance is not a multi-tasking activity. It is work that deserves our undivided attention. Perhaps that is more than you can spare this time of year. The greatest gift we can give is a commitment to unplug, to examine, to recommit and to do something that will contribute to God’s *shalom*.

God uses the most unlikely people to change the world. Perhaps that person is you. Who would have thought that God would choose this crazy, wild eyed, wilderness dweller to prepare the way for Jesus? Luke may begin this passage with the political and spiritual

---

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano, “This Isn’t the Way It’s Suppose to be,” [Episcopaldigitalnetwork.com](http://Episcopaldigitalnetwork.com), December 9, 2012.

heavy weights of the day, but they are not what are important to this story. This is the story of God's transformation. God uses whom God chooses. God chooses John. God chooses you.

To follow the Christ is to listen to the one who was sent to prepare the way to him. How is it that you might make the path straight and the mountains and hills low this Advent season? What can you do that will make the crooked way straight for one who is struggling? How might God use you to be an instrument of peace? These are the questions we ponder during Advent. This is the way we make peace possible in this crazy world.

The work we do during Advent is to prepare; prepare our homes for visitors, our hearts for new life, our souls to be enlarged by the presence of the Holy One. I love the writer and artist Jan L. Richardson. One of her advent devotions is entitled, "Prepare."

*Prepare*

Strange how one word  
will so hollow you out.  
But this word  
has been in the wilderness  
for months.  
Years.

This word is what remained  
after everything else  
was worn away  
by sand and stone.  
It is what withstood  
the glaring of sun by day,  
the weeping loneliness of  
the moon at night.

Now it comes to you  
racing out of the wild  
eyes blazing  
and waving its arms,  
its voice ragged with desert  
but piercing and loud  
as it speaks itself  
again and again.

*Prepare, prepare.*

It may feel like  
the word is leveling you  
emptying you  
as it asks you  
to give up  
what you have known.

It is impolite  
and hardly tame  
but when it falls  
upon your lips  
you will wonder  
at the sweetness

like honey  
that finds its way  
into the hunger  
you had not known  
was there.

Jan L. Richardson  
*The Advent Door 2012*

“This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be.” Peace is the way, love is the way, hope is the way, and joy is the way it’s supposed to be. Today we consider the way of Peace. Peace is not simply something for which we hope. Peace is possible when we prepare; prepare to be changed, to be bewildered, and to be a sacred place where the holy one will come to dwell. Look deeply within, have the courage to name the obstacles that keep you from experiencing true peace. Then trust that God is waiting for you where the road has been made straight, to help usher in this kin-dom of *shalom*. May it be so! Amen