

**St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA**  
**The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge**  
**Church Year C**  
**Date: 12/6/15**  
**Season: Advent 2**  
**Luke 3:1-6**

Here we are again in Advent. A beautiful way to begin the liturgical year with the invitation to expectant waiting, the invitation to quiet preparation, the invitation to hope. Those are often the themes of Advent sermons – some of which I’ve preached myself! – and they are wonderful themes, good and true themes. Advent is a time of quiet waiting, of preparation for something new being born into the world, and into our own lives, a time of hope. All those themes get lived out for about an hour and 15 minutes for four Sundays in the late fall.

Now I know there are many here – God bless you for this – who keep a holy Advent throughout the week – at home and at work, by taking on new prayer practices and some old familiar rituals like keeping an Advent calendar and maybe renewing commitments to feed hungry people or deepen your support for organizations that are serving the poor, the sick, the refugees. Bless you for this. All of this sanctifies the time.

And yet, the reality is that the world couldn’t care less about a holy Advent. Instead of quietly waiting for some thing new to be born, the world is scrambling, shopping, and closing year-end transactions and generally stimulating an even higher than usual level of anxiety. That’s how the world keeps Advent.

And so, on this second Sunday in Advent, as he does every year, John the Baptist emerges out of the waters of the River Jordan with a message for us.

“Prepare the Way of the Lord, Make his paths straight.” And while his message is always timely in the midst of the usual year-end anxiety, it’s particularly timely right now. Because overlaying this usual year-end anxiety, let’s face it, is a layer of dread. It keeps happening, doesn’t it? Last week it was the mass shooting at the Planned Parenthood Clinic in Colorado Springs. This week, the brutal murder of 14 – 14 souls – at a Christmas party at a clinic serving those with developmental disabilities in San Bernardino.

And we’ll see as we move through Luke’s gospel this year, Jesus was no stranger to terror. He and his family were refugees themselves, fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod’s state-sponsored terrorism. And then he was harassed and harried and finally arrested, convicted in a show-trial worthy of Stalin’s Soviet Union, and then tortured and executed. So Jesus didn’t come to make the world perfect. He came to show us how to

live in an imperfect world. And, finally, he came to redeem that imperfect world. All of this on the heels of so many similar tragedies in this country that are too numerous to recount right now. We are stunned spectators to a wave of horror that's right here close to home and across the world. The events shock us, sadden us, anger us, and frighten us. We look for safety, we look for security, we look for leadership. And, as believers we may find ourselves turning to God and saying, "Where are you? How can you allow this to happen? Where are you?"

So why doesn't God just wave the magic wand and eliminate all this evil? Why **isn't** the world perfect? Because, paradoxically, that would come at too great a cost. The core of our humanity, and at the heart of our humanity is our ability to deeply love – to love without force or coercion – to freely love God our Creator – to freely love the world God has created for us – and to freely love our fellow human beings, each made in God's own image. And the freedom to love always brings with it the possibility – no – the probability of suffering. And the story of the gospels is that God in Christ meets us in the middle of all our suffering and – in the power of the Resurrection – will ultimately and finally transform that suffering. In the meantime – and there's the rub for us – in the meantime, because that's where we live – in the meantime, living in faith and hope in the Resurrected Christ will allow our sufferings – all of our sufferings – to transform us.

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." The Baptist's call comes to us in the midst of our fear, our dread, our confusion over the seemingly random nature of these tragic events. And his words shouldn't be confined to Christmas cards or to holiday well-wishing. They are not sentimental. They are our marching orders. They are our call to "wake up" and get ready. Get ready for the purpose for which God has made us. And that purpose is **not** to consume all that we can. That purpose is not to kill and destroy our enemies. We are here to prepare the way of the Lord. To work with Christ to build up the Kingdom of God. To love and serve with gladness and singleness of heart, wherever that may take us.

So this is a different sort of Advent, an Advent where signs of some kind of cataclysmic changes grow more insistent by the day. Business as usual won't do for us. We can't wait until tomorrow to prepare the way of the Lord. Let's commit to at least one deliberate act of love every day. If you're inclined, contact some of our elected representatives. Let them know you expect them to do their part to bring this death spiral to a halt. This isn't a partisan issue. It isn't a political issue. It's a human being issue. There has to be common ground that can be found to make this killing stop.

And then ask God to heal the violence in your own heart. I know it's there in mine. I have to offer up my pull to violence to God every day. We can't stop the violence

of the world if our own hearts are filled with violence and sin. Offer that up to Christ. You know, for every inch we move closed to Christ, he moves a mile closer to us. So clear away all the junk and clutter and excess baggage that litters the way of the Lord. Make the road straight. An act of courage, one act of kindness, one act of devotion, one act of love at a time.

I want to close by sharing a special reflection with you. It was written this week, in this Advent season filled with both dread and hope, by Bishop Steven Charleston. He's a remarkable guy; former Bishop of Alaska, college chaplain, dean of a theological seminary, full-time evangelist. He is also a member of the Choctaw Nation which I mention only to point out the particular Native American spiritual perspective you may hear in what I'm about to share. It is perfect for our time.

I sat alone in the great hall, with only candlelight before me, listening to the wind racing past the windows and eaves, an unseen river running faster than sound, moaning with the voice of a hundred hearts, longing to find warmth where there is no warmth. This is the world in which we live, I thought. Running faster, looking for a place to shelter, cold and colder still, a wraith world of lonely hearts, singing its death song beneath a winter moon. Where is the warmth of our time? Where is the place where our hope finds its home? So many are answering: nowhere. Only the cry of the wind mourns us. I sat so silently thinking about this that I could no longer feel my own breathing. Is that true, I wondered. Do we have nowhere to turn, nowhere to go nowhere to discover a warmer world than the one we know chased by cold-handed winds? Winds of war, winds of fear, winds of a death song being sung by so many before their time. Is that true? I looked at the candlelight, small flames of gold and orange, shining on, uncaring about the rushing air outside, unconcerned about how small they were compared to the sorrowful river that could steal their lives in an instant. I looked at the candlelight, watching it dance, paying no attention to the moaning, not hiding from the power around it, just dancing, alone, in the great hall, with me. I smiled. Of course we have somewhere to go, somewhere to turn, somewhere to call our safe shelter and our home. Of course there is a counterpoint to the lament around us, a hope unmoved by the restless time running before its own fears. There is a place of light. A sure and certain home for every person who seeks it. Though the wind howl, it cannot find entrance or disturb the serenity of this most human of habitations. For nothing is more powerful than faith, no tempest more enduring than hope, no cry in the night that love cannot hear, and hearing, come quickly to comfort. The answer is already safe within us. Within all of us. Waiting for us. And so I smiled into the

silence beneath a peaceful moon. I left the great hall, walking out into the wind,  
but with candlelight in my heart.

Amen.