

## **“Vigils and Voices of Preparation”**

Luke 3:1-6

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Mary said it was one of the most extraordinary gatherings she has ever attended. A good friend of mine traveled to Germany this past October to remember and celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Mary, a Lutheran pastor, traveled with a delegation from the ELCA to participate in 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary observances of the dismantling of the 20 foot high concrete wall that ran through Berlin, Germany and symbolically between the communist and capitalist worlds. The Berlin wall was the line in the sand between the east and the west. It was the place where opposing social orders were only a stones throw apart physically, but ideologically divided in lethal ways.

Since being erected after WWII when “victorious” world powers carved up Europe and the Middle East, the Berlin Wall denied passage to family and friends on opposite sides of the Wall. Hundreds of people died trying to cross from one side to the other without proper papers. The Wall was erected to keep people in and to keep them out, it was erected to deny social, intellectual, and spiritual interaction. Unlike the Great Wall of China, which was conceived of as a barrier against invading armies, the Berlin Wall was a barrier against social and economic intercourse. Following WWII and the development of incredible weapons of destruction, the builders of the Wall had no illusion of it being much of an obstacle against invasion – strategically, it was more symbolic than pragmatic.

Though the former Soviet Union suppressed the church denying it financial resources, denying it the right to evangelize, to repair buildings, to distribute Bibles and limiting access to worship, the church did not die. Christians gathered in the Soviet Union in quiet ways. They often sacrificed personal resources and faced punishment for practicing their faith, but they persisted. They refused to let the ruling powers steal away their relationship with God, their source of love, dignity and hope.

Some 15-20 years after the Berlin Wall was constructed the members of St. Nicholas’ Church in the East German city of Leipzig began to hold vigils every Monday. Sometimes there were just a few people present for the vigil and probably some Mondays when no one showed up, but for as many as 10 years Christians gathered at St. Nicholas’ Church to offer prayers that the wall would be removed, that the terror of the cold war would end, that people of faith would be free to worship and live without persecution.

St. Nicholas' Church and those that gathered there became a focal point for peaceful protest and East Germany's quest for self-liberation. A month before the Berlin Wall was abandoned there were as many as 70,000 people gathering with candles each Monday night for the vigil.

When the Soviet official, not knowing what to say when asked the date when the border between the East and West would open blurted out that the border would open immediately, the people who had been standing vigil went to the wall cheering and crying and thanking God.

When my friend Mary gathered at St. Nicholas' Church in October, 20 years after the end of the cold war, she said there was more than 100,000 people who gathered for a candle light vigil and worship. She said it was one of the most powerful experiences of her life.

When she told me about the decade of vigils and prayers I could not help but think of the Israelites 40 years in the wilderness, who were hoping one day to enter a place they could call home and live in freedom.

Our gospel passage for this morning reminds us of the years when God's people wandered in the wilderness: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, 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 shall see God's salvation.'"

Contrary to what we often think the preparation the Advent season calls us into is not about washing away life's blemishes so that we have no concerns to bring before God. Advent is not a season of perfection, it is a season of hope that our places of brokenness can be healed instead of neglected. Advent isn't a season of avoiding what is most important in order to believe all is well in our lives and world.

The Advent preparation that John the Baptist calls us to, takes place in the wilderness, the desert. The Messiah we long for, the Messiah the world needs is one that offers hope when we are lonely, peace when we are conflicted, forgiveness when we have been cruel, beauty when life has turned ugly and rest when life has become frantic. The Messiah we hope for is one that can change hearts and relationships. The Messiah we hope for is one that can make all things new by entering our wilderness places with compassion and strength.

John Bell, a member of the Iona Community in Scotland, portrays the coming of the Messiah this way: "Light looked down and saw darkness. I will go there, said light. Peace looked down and saw war. I will go there said peace. Love looked down and saw hatred. I will go

there, said love. So the Lord of light, the Prince of peace, the child of love, came and crept in beside us.”

The Messiah that was hoped for some two thousand years ago was one that would enter in all the places of brokenness that people and the world experience.

Isn't this the Messiah that we hope for today? Don't we long for God to come into the darkness, the loneliness, the conflicts, the hunger, the hatred, the prejudices, and the wilderness?

When John the Baptist says “prepare the way for the Lord,” the Bible records that he does so in the desert, the wilderness. Our Advent preparation takes place in the bareness of the wilderness, not in worlds of illusion.

I read in the Dunn County News about a week ago, Ann Salt's column about having a sustainable Christmas. Ann was writing on behalf of the group “Sustainable Dunn,” that raises issues of environmental concern locally and globally. Ann had great ideas about what to use to wrap presents, buying locally, consolidating driving and offering the gift of time with a person. What I liked most about her article was that she saw Advent and Christmas as a time to live out her convictions instead of putting them aside during this time of year when we are longing for our deepest hopes to come true.

It is often the case that our families become one of our greatest sources of heartache and confusion during Advent and Christmas. Many of us have children, grandchildren, parents and grandparents living in distant parts of the country and world, which means that it is a struggle to be together at Christmas each year. It is also true that our families don't always see eye-to-eye regarding life. We can have sibling rivalries throughout the length of our years, we can compete for our married children's time with the in-laws, we can feel burdened by the need to do it all for everyone and in the end feeling exhausted or unappreciated.

The Messiah we long for can even come into our seasonal wilderness and we can live in hopeful ways. I talked to a member of our church who said she had decided that Christmas is a season, not just one day. She said she did this so that there was less pressure and frustration about not seeing her son and his family on Christmas day. She said she wanted to enjoy them whenever they came, and even though she didn't like it that they weren't home on Christmas, she has learned a new way to celebrate over several days instead of just one.

God comes to us in small and large ways. God comes to us to heal our addictions, to reconcile our relationships, to cure our warring madness, to release us from our passion for possessions, to lighten our impact on the earth.

The preparation that John the Baptist shouted about from the wilderness was filled with hope. He heightened people's awareness of the life around them and invited them to talk, to pray, to hold vigils and to be willing to change so that something new could happen.

In wilderness, prepare a way for God's coming, and God will come, God does come, God has come. Amen