This is Frederick Buechner's description of John the Baptist: “John the Baptist didn't fool around. He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet, and so did his disciples. He wore clothes that even the rummage-sale people wouldn't have handled. When he preached, it was fire and brimstone every time...Where John preached grim justice and pictured God as a steely-eyed thresher of grain, Jesus preached forgiving love and pictured God as the host at a marvelous party or a father who can't bring himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye. Where John said people had better save their skins before it was too late, Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew your whole bankroll on liquor and sex like the Prodigal Son, it still wasn't too late. Where John ate locusts and honey in the wilderness with the church crowd, Jesus ate what he felt like in Jerusalem with as sleazy a bunch as you could expect to find. Where John baptized, Jesus healed. Finally John decided to settle the thing once and for all and sent a couple of his disciples to put it to Jesus straight. 'John wants to know if you're the One we've been waiting for or whether we should cool our heels a while longer,' they said and Jesus said, 'You go tell John what you've seen around here. Tell him there are people who have sold their seeing-eye dogs and taken up bird-watching. Tell him there are people who've traded in aluminum walkers for hiking boots. Tell him the down-and-out have turned into the up-and-coming and a lot of deadbeats are living it up for the first time in their lives. And three cheers for the one who can swallow all this without gagging.' Nobody knows how John reacted when his disciples came back with Jesus' message, but maybe he remembered how he had felt that day when he'd first seen him heading toward him through the tall grass along the riverbank and how his heart had skipped a beat when he heard himself say, 'Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world' and maybe after he remembered all that and put it together with what they'd told him about the deadbeats and the aluminum walkers, he decided he must have been right the first time.”

After that, John was up and running, crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord!” Crowds started to gather around him and he baptized them. He warned the people not to rely on their ancestor Abraham for their sense of identity but to look ahead to the One who would soon define their lives completely. John preached about the coming Messiah, about the one they would soon meet, the one who was so powerful John did not think he was worthy to untie his sandals.

Luke was an historian and liked placing his accounts in their historical context. Thus we have him placing this passage in the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius' reign. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Herod was ruler of Galilee. Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests of the temple. It's an impressive array of powerful men, all of them capable of reaching a large number of people with what they had to say. Any one of them would be a good pick to announce the arrival of Jesus as he began his Galilean ministry. So whom did God pick? God picked a locust-eating, rag-wearing nobody, a man who lived on the outskirts of society to announce the coming of the Messiah. In the eyes of the world, it was ludicrous. Choosing a nobody like John, a strange dude who put people off with his diet and unique sense of style, to carry the news of salvation to all people? It still sounds kind of crazy to me.

In the fifteenth year of the twenty-first century, when Barack Obama was President of the United States, and Terry McCauliffe was governor of Virginia, and Will Griffin was mayor of Floyd, and Elizabeth Eaton was presiding bishop of the ELCA, the word of the Lord came to St. Mark Lutheran Church and Zion Lutheran Church in Floyd County. Like John, we just about live in the wilderness, at least that's what most of my friends and family think. Some of us dress funny – we're still wearing tie-dye 40 years after it was popular, for heaven's sake. I'm not so sure about the diet bit; I haven't seen any of you eat insects lately, but then again I recently saw one of our children eat the sap off the Chrismon tree. Many of us feel like puny nobodies. Even if we had something to say, who would listen? And yet...the word of salvation is placed in **our** hands.

You and I are now the bearers of this precious message, the ones chosen to cry out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Like those who sought out John and asked to be baptized, we, too have been washed in water and word. We have become part of the body of Christ – a church whose purpose is to proclaim that the Lord is near. How do we do that? The very first step is to kneel at the feet of God and ask his forgiveness for the ways in which we add to the darkness of this world rather than live as children of the light. We ask his forgiveness for times when we worship violence and belittle peace, for times when we fight amongst ourselves, for times when we forget that we are all children of God, for times when we do not stand up for the helpless among us. We ask our God of compassion to hold us gently, to forgive what we have done or failed to do, to free us from the shadow of death, and guide our feet into the way of peace.

We are just a little parish tucked in the mountains. How do we live as children of the light? How do our feet walk in the way of peace? How clearly and distinctly do we proclaim the righteousness of Christ to those who need justice in our world? We start in our homes. There, we treat one another with respect. We make our decisions on the basis of what God would have us do. We teach our children and grandchildren about God – about God's love for them and God's call to serve him all the days of their lives. Then we speak of God with our friends and colleagues, even if it sometimes feels awkward, because believing in God means seeing the world through a particular set of lenses. We practice over and over until we can start conversations with, “As a Christian, this is what I believe.” We come together as the body of Christ, pooling our strengths, our gifts, our desire to serve God in our communities and our country, welcoming Christ's light in a world filled with darkness. We pray for wisdom to follow where Christ leads, to stand up to injustice, to speak peace to a world saturated with violence.

And we learn from those around us. My dear friend Christy is quiet and soft spoken. She is hardly one you might pick out of a crowd to cry out, “Prepare the way of the Lord!” Yet that is exactly what she is doing. I've known Christy for almost 20 years – since she was a graduate student and I a pastor in a campus ministry program. After she graduated with a master's degree in religion, Christy worked for the World Council of Churches in their young adult program. There, she met young people of all religions, from all over the world. This experience sparked an interest in interfaith dialogue, a passion that has guided her life for the past decade or so.

Christy now works as the associate dean for religious life at Duke University, where she works daily with Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and other faith groups on campus. Back in January of this year, Christy supported a group of Muslim students who wished to have the bells of the Duke chapel chime the call to prayer for Muslims on campus. This group of students and faculty have their prayer services in the Duke chapel for each week, as do several other faith communities. Such is Christy's love for her students that she did not see the firestorm the students' request would bring. Christy said in an interview, “At Duke University, the Muslim community represents a strikingly different face of Islam than is seen on the nightly news: one that is peaceful and prayerful.” After a huge amount of backlash, the university rescinded its original OK for the prayer chimes and a firestorm of media attention followed. When I asked Christy how she was holding up, she said, “I just feel bad for my students. They are so disappointed.” Christy's commitment to interfaith dialogue does not come at the expense of her own faith. My friend, who keeps a head scarf in her office desk drawer in case she needs it for worship or a meeting with Muslim students, is a lifelong Lutheran, the daughter of a Lutheran pastor. Christy did her PhD work in Luther studies. She has recently started a Master of Divinity program, which she juggles with her job on campus and two young children. When she finishes, she will become an ordained Lutheran pastor. For me, Christy is an example of how God calls unlikely people, like this quiet young woman from a small town in North Carolina, to announce his return to the world. She also models how faith traditions can learn from and respect one another and how they can join together in the pursuit of peace in our world. Christy is one standing in the wilderness, calling, “Prepare the way of the Lord!,” fortelling a world in which God will bring all people together to live in harmony.

Prepare the way of the Lord. Each of us knows someone whose life announces the Lord's presence among us. Like the biblical John and the present-day Christy, our call as individuals and as a parish is to rise above the chatter of fear and anxiety in our world and speak a word of hope and truth. We come together as people of faith to hear about how Jesus has arrived in this world, bearing in his hands compassion instead of a sword or an automatic weapon, telling us that loving God and our neighbor are the most important tasks of our lives. We pray and we listen for God to tell us how we can be part of Jesus' kingdom breaking into our world. And then we do something.

This past week, in the wake of another sickening mass shooting, various writers have blasted people of faith who promise that their “thoughts and prayers are with the victims.” It's what we say, isn't it, when these things happen? And we mean those words; as the tears spill from our eyes, we pray for those innocent victims of violence in our country and our world. But when praying is all we do, our prayers can sound trite and empty to those who are watching for something else. Recently, Pope Francis said, "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That's how prayer works."

Prepare the way of the Lord. We already do so much as a parish to put our prayer into action. And we will do more, as God reveals God's plans for us in this tiny community and huge, broken world.

Amen.

Advent 2C December 6, 2015

Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish Luke 3:1-6