

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Hatfield
Second Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2021
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe
“Good News in Unlikely Places” (Luke 3:1-6)



I feel compelled to begin this sermon with coffee. Maybe because Malachi and John the Baptist proclaim hope and coffee gives me hope. That first sip every morning is a lifesaver. Like many of you I often have trouble sleeping, but I know that no matter how restless the night, in the morning that sip of hope and the cups that follow are always waiting for me and I quickly feel equipped to meet the new day. When I discovered the coffee at Wawa, and that every Tuesday I can get a free refill, that just made my day. Lynn laughed the first time I brought my Wawa tumbler to church. “You’re a real Pennsylvanian now,” she said.

I have to admit that got a little sidetracked by coffee in my sermon preparation. I was hoping there was a reason. I did learn a few things. Of course I knew that for some people caffeine poses health risks, but I found a surprising amount of information about coffee’s positive effects. A few cups each day is associated with a reduced risk of several chronic diseases. Coffee can not only improve energy levels but can make us smarter, maybe because we’re paying closer attention and exercising our brain more. But here’s the most fascinating bit of research I found:

“One of the most interesting facts in the history of the coffee drink is that wherever it has been introduced, it has spelled revolution. It has been the world’s most radical drink in that its function has always been to make people think. And when the people began to think, they became dangerous to harmful political pressure.”¹

Now don’t you think coffee HAD to have been John the Baptist’s drink of choice, this wild man who never stopped shouting for people to take on a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? How sleepless were his long nights, knowing that he alone was charged by God with preparing the way for the biggest revolution ever, the turning of the known world and its systems of dominion upside down? Was he as happy as I am to greet that first sip each morning?

Nope. No coffee for John. Apparently the brew wasn’t discovered until the 15th century. So was all that research for nothing?

Maybe the reason I am thinking about coffee is that it’s ordinary, the stuff of daily life. Last week we were faced with cosmic images of upheaval that were hard to fathom. Today the

¹ <https://wsimag.com/food-and-wine/62871-the-healing-properties-of-coffee> (Wall St. International Magazine, July 24, 2020)

Gospel moves into the immediacy of our own lives, the down and dirty, the hopes, the fears, the struggles.

The baptism of repentance that John is calling us to is not an actual baptism in which God's Spirit enters into the life of the one baptized. It is a full-throated acknowledgement before God not only of how we have failed to listen, watch, and obey, but how we have impeded the Gospel--how we have made the highway for God to come into our world crooked instead of straight. And not just crooked, but how we have thrown obstacles in the way. Concrete barriers, even, placed not along the median but blocking the middle of the lane.

First, consider our ministry. Because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, we are already saved by grace. The outcome of our lives and of all things is assured. Jesus *will* return in glory, and God's will *is* going to be done no matter what.

But that does not mean we throw up our hands and let things take their course. What if, after Jesus' death, the disciples had stayed locked in the upper room? After Jesus was put to death they fled there and locked the door out because they were terrified of being arrested as complicit in his ministry. Jesus still would have raised up Paul as his most vigorous disciple and the church would still have come into being. But without the cohort of the other disciples, progress would have been slower. The choice we make about our own ministry matters. How we *receive* the Word, how we *pray* for the work of God's Word, and how we *present* God's Word really matters. Go, and make disciples, Jesus commands us!

Then there is our study of scripture. We read the Bible not just to learn the stories, but to lament, to weep, and to rejoice with God through the many accounts of discipleship: The ecstatic joy of Miriam, who led singing and dancing to celebrate the Israelites' escape from Egypt. The frantic desperation of the writer of Psalm 69, who cries out, "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck!" The wondrous, open-hearted obedience of Mary. The incredible endurance of Paul on his missionary journeys in Acts, powering through one catastrophe after another. God has feelings--we know this from God's own Son. Jesus felt strongly about everything! And we are vessels into which God's feelings are poured for the sake of the world. Thirst for justice. Get angry at injustice. Yearn for healing, for hope. Open the crooked pathways to your heart and let God in.

None of this is easy. It requires a major reorientation that can cost us relationships. It means saying "No" to old habits and patterns that used to bring us comfort but which we now recognize were like those concrete barriers. Removing them is hard, and the process can feel like Malachi describes it--the burning away of impurities in the refiner's fire, the process of cleansing by fullers' soap. Fullers, by the way, were those who job it was to clean and whiten cloth, which involved soaking the cloth in soap and water and then beating or stamping on it to remove the impurities. If you feel stamped on, then you are probably on the right path.

How can we possibly endure all this? Cling to the assurance and hope of Isaiah 40, possibly the most lustrous chapter in all scripture, from which John's words today are taken. It begins,

¹Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem....

And concludes with words that we all know:

Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

God will give you the strength that you need. And now, for that cup of coffee....

Amen.