

Sermon: Make the crooked straight
2 Advent, Year C
Luke 3:1-6, Baruch 5:1-9

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In the second year of the reign of President Trump, when Ralph Northum was governor of Virginia, and Carolyn Dull was mayor of Staunton, and Mark Bourlakas was bishop of this diocese, the word of God came to the people of Emmanuel Church. Is that not how it goes in the Gospel of Luke? O.K. so maybe not exactly. But Luke's point in naming all of those leaders and places was to point out that this event actually happened at a specific time and place. The word of God was and is real. And John the Baptist was God's instrument to prepare the way for Jesus.

The time was 2,000 plus years ago, the place was the Judean wilderness. And in the Biblical wilderness, people usually have an opportunity to encounter God and be more fully formed as God's children. John the Baptist was calling the people to repentance, to turn around toward God, to change their minds about anything that would keep them from God. John was calling for a baptism that would acknowledge forgiveness of their sins. And he was preparing them for Jesus. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Sounds like a lot of earth work!

Advent is a season of preparation for Jesus and our scripture for today, with Luke quoting both the prophet Isaiah and Baruch, remind us of the necessary steps involved to be ready for our Savior. We begin with repentance, knowing that we have erred in our ways and we turn toward Jesus for guidance. But how exactly DO we make crooked paths straight or fill valleys or make mountains low? And are we sure we want to? Isn't part of the charm of living in Staunton or in the valley that we HAVE beautiful mountains, hills and valleys? Maybe God isn't asking us to take this literally with this massive earth work at all but to consider the ways of God and how we live and how those ways need to be adjusted to live in the way of Jesus.

The country has been focused this week on the death of President George H.W. Bush. Thousands of words have been spoken and written about the life of our 41st president. You probably know he was an Episcopalian, but as proud of that fact as we may be, the more important thing to note is the character of the man, and how he lived out his Christian faith. He was not a perfect human being but he gave us an example of how one might prepare the way for Jesus. He made the paths for Jesus straight by using his powerful position for the greater good and by his servant leadership. Bush filled the valleys by loving those he led, by being against tyranny and discrimination and never hating anyone. In fact he was said to have believed that "hatred corrodes the container it's carried in." He made mountains low through humility, kindness, humor, integrity, a quiet faith, forgiveness, unconditional love and believing that serving others enriched the soul.

This is what it means to prepare the way for our Lord, to make the crooked paths straight, to make the mountains low, to fill the valleys: To treat all people and the rest of God's creation with dignity and respect, to be inclusive and kind to all.

How might John the Baptist be speaking to us across 2000 years of history? This Advent can we creatively work to right a wrong, to offer forgiveness to a family member or a friend, to help the poor, to show kindness to a stranger, to humbly serve those God puts in our path with unconditional love? As we approach Christmas, and prepare the way of the Lord, can we find at least one way, each day, to make crooked paths straight, mountains low or valleys filled?
Amen.