

“20/20 Foresight”
Curtis Preston
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6
Advent 2 Year C

First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Longmeadow, MA
December 10, 2006

When Kofi Annan was near the end of his appointment as general secretary of the United Nations, and George W. Bush was half way through his second term as President of the United States, and Deval Patrick was the governor elect of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and Charles Ryan was the Mayor of Springfield, the word of God came to one in the wilderness who went all around the region of the Pioneer Valley, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall 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."

Sometimes we hear these texts and we think they have nothing to do with our lives. We hear a list of old names and old titles, and we think we're reading history. And not just history, but irrelevant history. When we hear a scripture about repentance and the forgiveness of sins, our gut reactions might be to think of this as bad news or a guilt trip. But the word, which came to John, was not bad news, it was not intended to make us feel bad about ourselves and was not about feeling guilty. When we lay out our sins before God, when we identify them, when we name them and claim them, when we give them over to God, and stop carrying them around and stop beating ourselves up, but instead start changing the way we think, and feel and act, when we seek to be transformed in mind of Christ, instead of taking on the culture of mindless consumption, we can know liberation, and yes, salvation. The word, which came to John, which comes to us, is that our God is about relationship, so much so that God couldn't stay far away, but instead had to be born into humanity. Repentance isn't about how bad we are, it is about being real about who we are in relationship to God. It's about naming the places we've still got some

work to do. I've still got some work to do. Any of you still have some work to do? But rather than allowing us to be chained to our sins, rather than allowing them to forever hold us back, God offers us grace and forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't about how good we are, it is about how good God is to us.

Last Tuesday I had the opportunity to go to a gathering of clergy with young children. This is just one of the many programs the Massachusetts Conference of the UCC offers to help sustain and support our pastors. And as we went around the circle sharing our joys and challenges of parenting and of ministry, the sentiment was offered again and again about how under-prepared we were. We were under-prepared to be parents, under-prepared to be ministers, and most definitely under-prepared to deal with the challenges and joys which come from two such demanding calls. And then we took some time to reflect on the stories of Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth and Zechariah, and how they to had calls from God, and also had to be parents, and they were either young and scared in the case of Mary, or old and scared in case of Elizabeth, but they believed that what they were being asked to do was part of their relationship with God.

We are never prepared for what the coming of a child into our lives will mean. We can take classes, we can read books, we can listen to the advice from other parents, but we are never really ready for that first night when you are scared to death that another life is completely dependant on you. And that that is the way that our God comes to us.

We are never really ready to do the job we've been asked to do. Not in parenting, not in ministry, not in teaching, not in business, not at the hospital, not in any field. We may have some training and some expertise, we may have some wise counsel from those who've been through it before but we're never really ready. We show up, we learn some, we make some mistakes, we learn from those, and we get better. But we would all agree that the fact that we will make mistakes, and that we'll learn from them, is not an excuse for not preparing. So while yes it is impossible to fully prepare for the birth of a child, or the beginning of a new job, or the coming of the Christ Child we'd also be crazy not to do something to prepare.

Now I know some of you are thinking, “but there are only 15 shopping days left til Christmas. It's too late this year, but I promise, next year I'll have all my shopping done by Thanksgiving so I can really do Advent right. I'm here to say there are still 15 days until Christmas, and it isn't too late. Starting today, any of us could decide to read one psalm every day until Christmas, starting today any one of us could decide to read through one of the shorter letters like Ephesians or Philippians, starting today we could decide to read just the first 5 chapters in the Gospel according to Luke. Any one of us could write down a line from favorite Christmas hymn and put it in our pocketbook or wallet so that every time we spent money for the next two weeks we would remember what this season is all about, we could pick 7 friends we haven't spoken to in a while and every other day write one a letter, not an email, but a real letter reminding them that they are important in your life, and the list goes on and on.

The word which John—this son of Elizabeth and Zechariah--preaches is that one is coming who will turn everything upside-down. It turned the ancient world upside-down and it can, if we let it, turns our world upside down too. World leaders and high priests are no match for the Christ Child who is coming. Luke makes a specific point of telling us all the names of the most powerful political and religious figures in the world, and then telling us that God didn't give them the word. Instead the word came to the crazy guy out in the woods, a word about baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The One who is coming knows about humble beginnings, One who is coming knows about temptation, One who is coming knows about rejections, knows about fear, knows about failure, knows about hurting people, knows about those shadowy forces in our lives which keep us from walking as people of light. And we don't even have to read the whole bible to know that, we don't have to read the whole Gospel of Luke to know that, if we read those first 5 chapters of Luke's gospel I mentioned we see what Jesus did, and if we pay attention, we see what God in Christ is doing still today.

We sometimes hear a scripture like today's and think it is bad news. But Isaiah 40, from which Luke takes this prophesy of Isaiah begins, "Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God." Comfort, O Comfort my people. It is the voice of one crying, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, the voice of one crying, "out in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, and make the path straight. For

Christians God walked as a human, talked as a human, and loved, and hurt as a human so we know God knows about our valleys. For Christians, God lived and died as a human, so we know God knows about the mountains and hills which stretch out before us, about the crooked ways which send us off in all kinds of wrong directions, about the rough patches that never seem to get smoothed out. But as Christians we know that those valleys can be filled, those mountains and hills made low, those crooked ways made straight, and those rough roads made smooth. Comfort, O Comfort my people says God.

When Kofi Annan was near the end of his appointment as general secretary of the United Nations, and George W. Bush was half way through his second term as President of the United States, and Deval Patrick was the governor elect of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and Charlie Ryan was the Mayor of Springfield, the word of God came to one in the wilderness who went all around the region of the Pioneer Valley, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall 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." All flesh shall see the salvation of God. Amen.