

Today is the second Sunday of Advent and we are once again invited to hear the story of John the Baptist. This year we are reading his story from the gospel of Luke. John is the one who shows up from the wilderness to help announce the entrance of Jesus into the story of humanity.

In our reading today we will hear lots of hard names to pronounce. John Mark has drawn the short end of the stick being the layreader today. He will be reading the names of emperors and governors and rulers and priests. These are all famous people at the time of John the Baptist.

Luke will use their names to date the story but Luke will also use their names for another purpose. For the in-breaking of God's Spirit through Jesus will not come through these famous people granted political and religious power. Instead, the in-breaking of God's Spirit will occur in the wilderness.

### **Read Luke 3:1-6**

Our opening music today was "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Before we sang the words, I invited everyone to pay attention to the lyrics. For this very familiar song that we sing at this time of year is a song of lament.

It is the song of all of us who are weary and longing for something better. It is the song of all of us who are struggling with the challenges of life and looking for the Spirit of God to be revealed.

Let me read the words from the third verse with some slight variation for clarity. As you hear these words read, ask yourself if they describe the world that you live in right now and your hopes for a better tomorrow.

"O come, one that nations desire, bind all peoples in one heart and mind. May envy, strife, and discord cease. Fill the whole world with heaven's peace. Rejoice, rejoice. Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel."

Many of us come into worship today feeling weary. Some of us are weary from the endless struggles against a virus that keeps mutating.

It's a constant battle to keep you and your family and others safe from the effects of the virus and you are frustrated that others don't seem to take the same precautions as you do.

Many of our health care workers are weary from the constant strain that they are under in caring for people infected by Covid and other diseases. But we don't see these people in worship because they are just too tired and too overworked. They are many of the forgotten soldiers in this war.

Many of our educators and their families are feeling weary from being asked to do more with fewer people around to help. Teaching positions in South Carolina and in other states are understaffed leaving the ones who show up having to manage more and more students.

2020 was difficult but 2021 has proven to be more difficult for schools as students are having difficulty adjusting back to in-person classroom settings. Teachers and administrators feel that they are constantly attacked no matter what they do even though they are trying to do the best that they can under the most trying of circumstances.

I obviously work in the church. Recent studies show that about 40% of pastors are seriously considering quitting and leaving ordained ministry right now. My wife is a Christian Educator who feels that she is working harder than she ever has.

But like so many working in the church, she is seeing less of an impact from her efforts because so many people have left churches due to the pandemic and changing habits. She and others in organized church leadership are feeling very weary.

And on top of that we continue to have school shootings and racial strife and our government struggles to accomplish anything of importance because there is so much political opposition rather than cooperation.

Yes, we approach Advent 2021 feeling weary. Really weary. And so the words of the German writer who crafted "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" become our words.

"Bind all people in one heart and mind. Cease envy, strife, and discord. Fill the whole world with heaven's peace. O Come, O come, Emmanuel."

Emmanuel means "God with Us." In the midst of our weariness we yearn for God to be with us somehow. Somewhere. Come, Emmanuel, God be with us in the midst of our weariness. God be with us in the midst of living in a wilderness.

But this is not the first time that the world has called out for God to be with us during difficult times when people are weary. This is not the first time when people have called out from the wilderness.

In our text today, we are introduced to some very powerful people. Emperors, governors, rulers, and high priests. Certainly these are the types of people that God will choose to reveal the presence of God to for the world to see.

But God's revelation does not happen through any of them. In fact, as the story unfolds, these powerful people will end up being the villains in the story.

Instead, we read about someone who comes out of the wilderness quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. This guy from the wilderness is the one saying to prepare the way of the Lord for valleys will be filled and mountains will be made low and crooked paths will be made straight.

You may have entered worship today feeling that your valleys are deep. You may be feeling that your mountains are high. And you may be feeling that your path is like a constant roller coaster of change with times of highs and times of lows.

But we remind ourselves of the words of John the Baptist at this time of year because we need to see signs of hope in the midst of the weariness that we feel. We need to know that God is still in charge. We need to be reminded of Emmanuel, that God is with us.

I think that many of us have been yearning for Advent because we need to experience the rituals once again. We need to light advent candles.

We need to hear about hope, peace, joy, and love. We need to sing the ancient songs. We need to have a sense that there is order in the midst of chaos.

We need all of these rituals this time of year because they are all signs that in the midst of our weariness we proclaim the counter cultural message that Emmanuel is with us. That our weariness is not the final word but that God's presence, Emmanuel, is the final word.

As we continue in the Advent journey, I invite us to follow this story of John the Baptist and not look to the rich and powerful and famous to encounter the breaking in of God's Spirit. We look to the wilderness. Our wilderness.

For it is in the wilderness that John the Baptist appears. And it is in our wilderness of weariness that Emmanuel, God with us, appears.

As the first verse of the hymn proclaims, "we mourn in lonely exile until the Son of God appears."

Rejoice, dear friends, rejoice from the wilderness. Emmanuel shall come to Thee. Amen.

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-Given: December 5. 2021 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)