



November 28, 2021
Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans
Luke 3:1-6
Christmas Notes: Every Valley



It's the most wonderful time of the yearrr! I absolutely love it when I start hearing the holiday music. Especially when *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas*, as the stores are decorated and the trees are adorned. I must confess that along with Bing, *I am Dreaming of a White Christmas!* Though I am not writing Christmas cards. It is a different type of note I want to focus on this Advent, the musical ones, that fill our ears with mirth (it's got to be mirth, not simple happiness?!) and the joy and goodwill that permeates people's hearts.

Some people begrudge the takeover of this Advent Season with secular themes such as endless parties, present buying, cookies and more. And yes, there are some challenges to this, but overall I think Christians are too Grinchy about this, for it is a sign. A sign that even those who do not believe cannot help but get caught up in the *Joy to the World*, of the greatest story ever told.

And what better place in the world but New York City to experience this thrill. To walk the streets and to see them teaming with people out to enjoy themselves at the Rockefeller Tree, to go skating and window shopping, to see all the tourists wanting to experience the power of the holiday season.

For even that word, holiday, betrays the true power of the coming weeks, for "holiday"

is of course a "Holy-Day" event. And if New York is the best place then outside of Brick Church, on December 5th, at the hymn sing and tree lighting is the epi-center! And I cannot wait. I cannot wait to *Hark the Herald*, to sing hymns with thousands of people, people of the Christian faith, people of other faiths, and people of no-faiths all together of one voice and one heart. It spills over, past the boundaries of creed, and brings light and life.

But as Christians we have a particular focus that the early 20th century British poet, G.K. Chesterton, so aptly reminds us of, "When we were children we were grateful to those who filled our stockings at Christmas time. Why are we not grateful to God for filling our stockings with legs?"

It is that time of the year for us to begin a weeks long journey to the manger to prepare ourselves to be grateful for all of God's gifts. Along with the power of scripture, the power of music will get us there. When we combine the two we have the best tool of all.

Our passage this morning from Luke, the words of John to the crowds, "Prepare Ye the way of the Lord", I first heard at Broadway Presbyterian Church in the musical *Godspell*. "Pre-e-ye- pare ye-the-way- of- the-Lorrrd!" In my 6-year-old mind, it had a magnetic, heraldic quality. The lone, simple voice that offered an invitation was soon joined by others and at the

climax I was actually expecting Jesus himself to arrive. The movie of course takes place in New York with random people drawn by the voice, kicking off their shoes, jumping in the Bethesda fountain in Central Park! Filled with joy, the different faces of people, the voices unique, all blending together; it truly felt like a Kingdom moment.

The emotional high of this electric moment is only exceeded by the true story behind it. John the Baptist was quoting Isaiah, who was speaking of a homecoming for Israel some 600 years earlier. They had ached and lamented their exile and some of the most heartbreaking words were written during this time, "God has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship." and "From on high he sent fire, sent it down into my bones. He spread a net for my feet and turned me back. He made me desolate, faint all the day long."

The people had sinned and they felt their exile and defeat at the hands of their enemies was God's punishment. Isaiah foretold of a day of restoration, a promised day in which God would level out the mountains and raise up the valleys to make their long journey home through the wilderness an easy one, devoid of brambles and rough terrain.

By quoting Isaiah, John accomplishes two things. First, he reminds them that God is a God of liberation and of freedom, a God rooted in historic acts, not misty nostalgia. And that they should be a thankful people that God is a real God who acts in ordinary time and space. Isaiah's words were particularly a hope for Israel but on John's lips they become hope for the world. John is the herald, announcing a new

promise to be fulfilled, rooted in the old, a promise of liberation, not for one time and place, but for all times. Not for one people, but through that one people it becomes a promise for all.

This makes God a "God of the now" for John's crowd, for Jesus is here, God in the flesh. But not only now, but a "God of the future", of a time beyond time, to a time when time ends and the glory of the Lord leaps past the historical and particular, into the timeless and the universal.

So the hope we gain in this text has a dual layer. Just as we hope Christmas can be a time of greater friendliness in the city, that it can be a time to heal old wounds, that the estranged child will come home, but it also offers a greater hope – the final homecoming and the hope that not just the valleys of the Biblical wilderness, but *Every Valley* shall be exalted! Every single valley.

Even the wording from Handel's *Messiah* elevates the hope from the particular to the metaphoric. Handel used the text from Isaiah, which reads, "Every valley shall be exalted," as opposed to Luke's gospel which reads, "Every valley shall be filled." Filling brings to mind acres of dirt being poured into the valleys to make them level, something great engineering projects have accomplished. But "Every valley shall be exalted," evokes a sense of gargantuan power, lifting up the valley, something beyond the power of mere mortals. Thus, Handel accentuates the word "exalted" by having the soloist stretch out the word over many measures, moving up and down the scales,

creating this sense of climbing, of elevation of these treacherous valleys.

Valleys have become a metaphor for those hard, dark places in life in which we cannot see beyond despair into hope. GK Chesterton had a powerful insight, “One sees great things from the valley, only small things from the peak.” Once you have climbed the summit, all below looks small and the insights and hopes are also small, but from the deep valleys of life, we hope of things beyond our sight into the realm of God. God uses the valleys in life to grow our discipleship. It is the valleys that give the mountaintops meaning as Helen Keller observed, “The hilltop hour would not be half so wonderful if there were no dark valleys to traverse.”

For it is in the valleys that we cannot climb out of that we realize it is by God’s power and God’s grace. The valley of greatest fear and horror, the “Valley of the shadow of death” is the one in which this is most clear. Though the twenty-third Psalm is metaphorical, there was a literal valley of death in Ancient Israel, the Valley of Gehennon which was so terrible it became the Hebrew word for Hell, Gehenna.

A Rabbi friend from Birmingham Alabama, Jonathan Miller, gave me a book by another Rabbi, David Wolpe. In it is the story of an archaeological dig, which had an amazing discovery:

Two amulets in the form of tiny silver scrolls just a few inches long... crusted with dirt and corrosion they had been rolled shut for 2,600 years! Working with painstaking care, opening them gently and slowly they found a barely

legible inscription, the oldest parchment of any piece of sacred scripture that exists.

The location of the find was of particular significance, the Valley of Gehennon. Just as there are thin places in which God seems more readily available so to are there places in which evil is palpable. It was a place during ancient times in which the sacrifice was offered up to vengeful and violent lustful gods.

God’s word was even there in the deepest valley of despair on earth.

So Isaiah, and Handel afterwards, carried through from the promise of raising EVERY VALLEY, to the praise, “And the glory, the glory of the Lord, shall be revealed.” As it was revealed in those scrolls. That deeply layered exultant chorus, by repeating the phrase time and again, “and the glory and the glory and the glory, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed” sends home this power of God, reminding us it may be a long time coming but it will come nonetheless.

So this Advent, as you hear those holiday songs, share hot cider and shop those windows, be delighted. But don’t feel to *Prepare Ye, the way of the Lord*. So that every valley will be exalted in your life and others as the Glory of God is revealed in the coming birth of our Lord, the promised redeemer and reconciler of the world.

Let me conclude with the words unfurled in those scrolls after being shut away in Gehenna, in Hell, for 2,600 years. They are words of hope, no matter what valley you are in, “May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the

Lord be kind and gracious unto you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and give you peace.” Amen.