**Luke 3:1-6**

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, 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 out 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.’”

(Judith Jones) The Second Sunday of Advent is traditionally “the prophet’s day” with texts devoted to John the Baptist. But the Gospel reading - which has the adult John the Baptist striding out of the Judean desert to prepare the way for the adult Jesus Christ - is oddly out of place in Advent, at least the way Advent is celebrated in the 21st Century. Luke’s litany of imperial, regional, and religious authorities contrasts human kingdoms with God’s reign. The claims to authority that Tiberius or Herod or the high priest may make are not ultimate. God’s people owe allegiance first and foremost to God. And it is God’s word that sets John’s ministry in motion. John has been commissioned to prepare the way not for lord Caesar or any earthly lordling, but for the one true Lord. Like Moses, like the prophetic voice in Isaiah 40, John challenges God’s people to see the wilderness as a place not of desolation, but of hope. God is calling them, like the Babylonian exiles, to leave their captors behind and head home through the wilderness. God is calling them, like the people of Israel in Egypt, to join an exodus out of slavery into God’s promised fresh start. John preaches that the first step on this journey toward freedom is a baptism of repentance.

**Readings Advent 2C**
**Malachi 3:1-4** (Malachi means ‘messenger)

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

The day that YHWH of Hosts (an army term) brings is not a military conquest. Rather, it sparks a period of purification and refinement, necessary to prepare people for the worship of God. Malachi is addressed to post-exilic Jerusalem after the rebuilding of the temple (ca. 516/515 BCE). It speaks to a priestly audience that lacks some confidence in the power and sanctity of the pre-exilic temple rituals and certainly lacks reverence for their correct observance. Yet the prophet does not disparage the Levitical priesthood completely, even as he offers strident criticism of their corruption and lack of obedience. Rather, he envisions the renewal of the priesthood that will restore the office to its historic holiness, providing for proper and faithful worship. This renewal comes through testing and cleansing. It is the refining fire that brings precious metal to light, and it is the washing with strong detergent. The purpose of divine judgment is not to punish but to prepare the way of the Lord. It is to bring restoration and renewed life. It is to train the people in obedience to the covenant so that they may offer reverent praise. Malachi’s proclamation may strike a discordant tone with our Advent expectations. Our preparations are often informed by pastoral images of sweet baby Jesus surrounded by choirs of angels and placid sheep around the manger. While we can affirm that the coming of Jesus Christ, the prince of peace, is good news of great joy for all people, this does not mean that Christ’s presence demands nothing of us or leaves us unchanged. Like a refiner’s fire and cleansing soap, the arrival of Christ in our midst calls us to reverent obedience and faithful praise. The good news is indeed that we will not be left unchanged but will be reformed and refined to become like Christ.

**Luke 1:68-79**

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

(Rolf Jacobsen) The song of Zechariah (father of John the Baptist) rehearses fidelity of “the Lord God of Israel” to the divine promises spoken in the Old Testament and fulfilled in Jesus. The song celebrates God’s Holy Spirit breaking into the ordinary, mundane world. And bringing with it God’s preferred and promised future. The theology of Zechariah’s song is elegant and ideal for Advent. The Spirit-empowered poem recalls God’s promises. The words of promise to David that “he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old” and “the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham.” The promises of salvation from enemies, of redemption from danger, of freedom to love and serve God in holiness and righteousness. And the song announces that these promises are kept in the nearly-twin arrivals of John and Jesus. John’s own role (‘and you child…’) would be to serve as “prophet of the Most High.”

**Philippians 1:3-11**

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

(Bill Loader) Paul’s understanding of love relates to God's love flowing among us and through us into the world - for all. It is wonderfully big and generous. It is love which is well-informed and able to be critical, to differentiate faith from phoney or destructive forms of (Christian and other) religion. Paul’s very open, love-centred form of Christ's gospel was criticised as "unscriptural" and far too "way out". Paul wants people to be genuine/honest/sincere and faultless/having a clear conscience. Rigid adherence to laws is something Paul sees not only as erroneous, but also as destructive and the opposite of everything he would understand as holy and good. That is because, for Paul, God’s holiness consists in God's love, not in a kind of self-protective obsession with order and rightness where laws and rules matter more than people. Paul's stance echoes Jesus' declaration that the sabbath was made for people, not people for the sabbath. Paul completes this section of the letter with another image of what matters most for Paul. It is having people live lives which produce the fruit of righteousness/justice which we see demonstrated in Jesus. His image of praising God has less to do with hymns than it has to do with real people living changed lives. Behind this language is one of the big arguments which people launched against Paul. If you take this free approach of saying people are not to live by the Law as a set of instructions and if you say that scripture is pointing to hope and renewal rather than laying out a manual of what one should do to get life, won't that lead people to disregard what is good and go off the rails? If people are going to be good, then they need sets of rules and commandments. Paul spends much of his time fending off these criticisms. Goodness, he often argues, is the fruit of a good relationship with God, much more than a following of laws, biblical or otherwise. The goodness that God wants is nothing less than the flow of love which marks the heart of God's doing and being.