



Pastor Paisley Le Roy Installation

Luke 3:1-6

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Bethlehem Lutheran Church

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Both of our readings for today speak of a God who, at various points in history, has sent messengers into the world. Malachi, whose very name means messenger, is sent to the community of Israel, and he was sent to prepare the way of the Lord by refining and purifying; his words set on fire the things in their lives that did not serve God's interests, so that they could be prepared for the new and pure thing God was about to do.

And, of course, from the gospel of Luke, the messenger we know quite well, John the Baptist. John the Baptist, cousin of Jesus, son of Zechariah, character of characters. As we heard in the children's time, he was a man who fed off bugs and had a wardrobe of camel hair and a home in the desert. And he, too, was called by God, to deliver a message, a message that would wake people up, turn people around, and ultimately prepare the way for Emmanuel, God coming to be with us.

Today we gather to give thanks to God for another messenger that God has sent into the world and into the church. Paisley Le Roy, called by God first in her baptism, called by God throughout her life to serve, to learn, and to grow, and called by God now to Bethlehem Lutheran Church in St. Charles, IL to serve as a messenger of the gospel among us.

As Paisley and I were talking about this service and trying to make connections between the ministry of John the Baptist and the installation of our Associate Pastor, Paisley, as I've come to expect, didn't miss a beat. She said, "Well, John's pretty weird and I'm pretty weird so I think it's a

good fit.” That comment so captures two of the things I love best about working with you: your wit and your self-awareness.

And you’re on to something. Beyond his strange clothing and pitiful diet, there are a lot of things about John the Baptist that don’t quite line up with what we might expect for a messenger paving the way for Jesus. Before he’s even born, John kicks in his mother’s womb. Poor Elizabeth. Late pregnancy is awful enough, but there he is kicking and jostling, I think making clear that, upon his arrival, he’s not going to be about keeping people comfortable and satisfying human expectation; he’s coming to blaze trails and to call people to the truth.

While John comes from a line of preachers on both sides of his family, he spends very little of his time inside the temple and he has no formal religious training that we know of. He delivers his sermons not from a pulpit or podium, but from the wilderness, the place people avoid at all costs. Perhaps he knows that, in order for people to hear what he’s saying, they’ve got to be willing to leave behind what they know. The message that John delivers in this desert place is not one of tenderness or grace, but one of rather severe honesty, one that even casts judgment, not to put people down but to help people see what’s real, to help people see what’s possible when they let the way of God change their minds and change their lives.

John is weird, you’re right. He dresses weird, he lives weird, he speaks weird, and he plays an awfully significant role in introducing people to a God and to a love that defies human norms and expectations over and over again.

Pastor Paisley, when I think about your delightful weirdness, I think of your glued-together birkenstocks, your love of incense, the complete joy you find digging in dirt, and your spotify wrapped list from 2021 that

revealed that your top two most-listened-to artists of this year were Lizzo and Taize chant music. I bet there's no other human on this planet that has those two artists right next to each other on that list. When I think of your delightful weirdness, I also think of the wonder that it is, and the witness that it is, that you are a pastor. Church was not a part of your life growing up, not until 6th grade. Raised in a home that often included multiple foster children under one roof, you talk about the way that you needed a place outside of your home that was yours, and you found it in the church.

Because of that part of your story, you have a particular gift, I've found, of helping the church remember who we are called to be. You can articulate with such passion what it is to know belonging, what it is to create spaces where people, and especially our young people, are free and safe to be fully themselves. One of the areas we've called you to lead us in is in the area of children and youth ministries, and in the year that you've been here, we've already witnessed the value you place on creating spaces of love and belonging. Especially in a year when we are having to confront the effects that this pandemic is having on the mental health of our children and youth, you are crystal clear that the church has a gift to offer to our hurting world, and we implore you to continue leading us, to continue showing us the calling that is ours as we slowly and clumsily journey through this long wilderness of collective trauma and grief.

Speaking of this pandemic, installing you 14 months after you began your ministry with us is just one more thing to add to our exceedingly-long list of things that have not gone according to how we would have planned them if it were up to us. Pastor Paisley, I cannot in good faith speak at your installation and not name what a challenging first year of ministry you've had. Trying to meet the people of this congregation

when it wasn't safe to meet face to face, trying to teach Confirmation to youth you've never met, via zoom, trying to learn the ropes of worship when nothing from your seminary class on worship applies; it's been one adaptation, one pivot after another. I spoke earlier that it's a bit of a miracle that you became a pastor, and I think it's no small miracle that you still are a pastor after the first year you've had.

We don't see it here in this passage, but later on in Luke's gospel, John the Baptist, after working so hard to prepare people for Jesus, after taking considerable risks out of care for the gospel, he finds himself locked up in prison. Herod had had enough of him. I'm sure it's not the future that John had hoped for, but he had done his job, and he knows that Jesus is now wandering the region, doing the remarkable work that John had prepared everyone for. In some ways, his captivity clearly allowed for the baton to be passed.

John was stuck behind bars, but he continued to get updates on what Jesus is doing out in the world. And so he heard of the day Jesus spent cleansing a leper, and of another time when Jesus healed a paralytic, and of the moment when he brought restoration to a man with a withered hand. This ministry of gentle and particular healing was well and good, but it was not what John had expected. He kept waiting for the big announcement, he kept hoping for a revolution of sorts. When it didn't happen, John sent a message to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

John's disappointed. What he thought would come to be has not come to be. The way he imagined God healing and saving the world is not how God-in-the-flesh seems to be doing those things. The work that John

had given so much of himself to hasn't quite turned up the results that he had hoped for.

Sound at all familiar, Pastor Paisley?

Even John the Baptist, clear as he was in the womb that he wasn't coming to meet peoples' expectations, he was human and he, too, lived with expectations that weren't fulfilled in quite the way he had hoped. Jesus receives this question from John, and he sends his disciples back to John with this message – “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.”

I love how Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:

“John the Baptist had wanted a fireball from heaven, a tidal wave of a Messiah who would be impossible to miss, who would make a clean sweep of things, who would witness to the [indisputable power] of God. What John got instead was a steady drip of mercy from a man named Jesus, in whom plenty of people saw no potential at all.”¹

What John got instead was a steady drip of mercy from a man named Jesus.

None of us have gotten through the past year without encountering disappointment, in our society, in people we love, in plans gone awry, maybe even here at church. We went into this past year having no idea the pandemic would go on as long as it's gone on, I think we all imagined that coming out of it would be clearer and smoother, but it's been hard and messy and not without disappointment.

¹ <https://cathedral.org/sermons/sermon-1998-12-13-000000/>

I've wished for you many times, Pastor Paisley, a very different kind of year to kick off your public ministry. And I've wished for all of us relief and healing and joy in the midst of this wilderness time that seems to have no end. And probably underneath those hopes is a wish similar to John the Baptist's, for God to act in a more demonstrative, drastic way, to send some kind of fireball from heaven that sets things straight and gets us moving in a clear direction again.

But what we have instead is a steady drip of mercy from a man named Jesus. Little by little, drip by drip, eyes are opened, hearts are healed, new life peaks through.

And, friends, as we've traversed this wilderness, we have been witnesses to God's mercy, if only we have eyes to see.

I mentioned to someone at a funeral visitation last year that I was the pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church. Having seen our yard signs all over the community – remember those? Early pandemic days? They said to me, "Oh, you're the church that has all those love signs up." Drip.

Next week 205 letters will be delivered to our Congressional leaders, advocating for an end to hunger. Drip.

Our youth held a prayer service a few weekends ago, and they shared openly prayers for their struggles with mental illness. Reducing the stigma, sharing support. Drip.

We now receive at our church offerings, not just of money, or of time, but of food scraps for our compost bin. Drip.

The Heronemus family continues to receive meals and financial donations that allow them to care for their beloved, Steve, as he lives with advanced ALS and cancer. Drip.

Two-year-old, Fallon, was baptized here a few weeks ago, and she kicked and squiggled and screamed until she was able to sit on the side of the font and put her fingers in the water herself. Drip.

I could go on. Drip. Drip. Drip. These are not big stories, but small stories, in which only a few people at a time are saved. But, as Taylor writes, “we are people of faith, and we remember that even stone is shaped by drips of water. And for reasons beyond our understanding, that is how our Messiah has decided to come – not all at once, but drop by drop, steadily and softly. Every time someone lives as Jesus lived, and loves as he loved, another drop falls.

My prayer for you in your ministry here, Pastor Paisley, is that you will feel this gentle shower of mercy upon you as you lead, preach, baptize, and bless. And my prayer for all of us, especially in this long wilderness, is that we will hold plans and expectations gently so as to be shaped by, so as to be participants in, the steady drip of mercy that is of God.

Amen.