

Finding Peace in a VUCA World (2): Prepare

A Sermon by Louise Westfall

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

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Text: Luke 3:1-6

Perhaps no other verb captures the essence of this season for people of faith than "prepare." "Prepare the way of the Lord" bellows the prophet John, quoting the prophet Isaiah who proclaimed it centuries before. But what does it mean, exactly? What are we preparing for? And *how* do we prepare?

This is an important question. Strategic planners will tell you that effective outcomes will be achieved to the extent that thoughtful preparations have been made. The United States military first coined the term "VUCA" precisely because its description of the contemporary landscape exerts tremendous influence on preparation for a secure and thriving society. How can we prepare for Christ's arrival with its promised hope and peace while living in a VUCA world—one characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity?

It's not that we don't try. Our preparations this month get very intense. We try to do more, to fit it all in before December 25th: cooking and baking and cleaning and decorating and partying and buying and wrapping and sending and arranging; at church we're rehearsing and costume-ing and proofreading bulletins and envisioning sermons and cooking dinners and praying like crazy and setting up and taking down . . . we won't be satisfied until we get it all just right, because finally, we believe a successful outcome---a joyous and meaningful Christmas---depends upon it.

Whew! No wonder we're stressed! No wonder we're tired! Our VUCA world -and our own expectations—provide the background from which we hear the prophet's call "to prepare." So it's not surprising that we may hear it with puzzlement and confusion. We supposed to *do* something,

aren't we? We're trapped in a world that is moving faster than we can absorb, at a pace beyond what we can endure. And then we're told to "prepare." You call that good news? Sounds more like another addition to the "to do" list. Prepare! Got that?! Listen for God's Word in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the third chapter at the first verse. *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 Lysannias 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 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.*

[DICK interrupts]

DICK: When??

LOUISE: *[confused]* Huh???? What do you mean? "When" what???

DICK: When?

MISSY: *I don't know.*

LOUISE *[to Missy]*: Do you know what he's talking about?

ERIC: *I don't know.*

LOUISE: *I think you're both crazy.*

DICK:*[a little more anxious]* When???

MISSY:*[softly, pondering]* I don't know. I just don't know.

ERIC: Soon, I think.

MISSY: Do you?

ERIC: Yes, I think so.

LOUISE: What????

DICK: When?????

LOUISE: [exasperated] Would someone please tell me what's going on?

ERIC: We're waiting.

LOUISE: For what????

MISSY: I don't know.

LOUISE: What do you mean you don't know?? How can you be waiting for something if you don't know what it is---doesn't make any sense. This is ridiculous!

DICK: For God, maybe.

LOUISE: Huh????

ERIC: Yes, I think so.

LOUISE: What???

ERIC: Yes, for God.

LOUISE: For God, what???

MISSY: What we're waiting for.

LOUISE: You're waiting for God??????

ERIC: I think so.

LOUISE: Don't you know???

DICK: I think we know. But we don't know when.

MISSY: Or how.

LOUISE: This is stupid. If you don't know how or what, or when, how do you even know you're waiting for something????

DICK: Because God said.

LOUISE: Said what???

MISSY: Because God said.

ERIC:that it would happen.

LOUISE: That WHAT would happen?????

DICK: That there would be peace,

MISSY: harmony,

ERIC: justice,

DICK: righteousness,

ERIC: mercy,

MISSY: a new beginning,

ERIC: a clean slate,

DICK: our sentence commuted;

ERIC: our fears allayed;

MISSY: mountains brought low,

ERIC: and valleys lifted up.

DICK: God with us,

MISSY: God within us,

ERIC: God will jump for joy!

LOUISE: God said THAT???

ERIC: Yes.

DICK: When?

MISSY: (nodding slowly) When

LOUISE: But what are we supposed to do?

DICK: Did you say when????

ERIC: There must be a date or schedule. Where's the contract? Where's it written down? What do the directions say???? We can't just sit here, waiting. Let's get busy!

[DICK, MISSY, ERIC, stay at lectern, fidgeting and looking concerned]

LOUISE: STOP! Wait. I mean really WAIT. Wait for God. We've forgotten what we're preparing FOR. Not for a holiday, not for a high, holy day. Our busy-ness won't pave the way. Our exhaustion won't fill the valleys or straighten out the crooked places. Friends, John calls us to prepare the way OF THE LORD. We are preparing to receive God in a new and deeper way, because God has reached out to us. God has come to us. Our preparation is simply to take hold of that earth-shaking, reality-transforming truth. God is here. With us.

The biblical word for embracing the reality of God's presence is "repentance." It means to change your mind, to recalculate your position and reorient yourself towards God and a brand new life.

Take a deep breath. Let it out. A sigh of relief. A refilling of our weary spirits. Breathe. God is here.

We come to a table that has been prepared for us. A table of forgiveness, of nourishment. A table where we remember that God came to us as a vulnerable human being—someone who knew sorrow and joy and frustration and excitement. . . . and death. We also remember that from this mixture of mayhem and miracle, God brought forth life---abundant and eternal. Here we taste that life. Here we experience communion with God and all God's people. It is gift and grace and we have only to receive its blessing. Prepare the way of the Lord!

DICK: The days will come.

LOUISE: When?

MISSY: In those days. . . .

LOUISE: What days?

ERIC: A long, long time ago.

[ALL PAUSE]

LOUISE: Why not now?

DICK: What?

MISSY: When?

ERIC: Now???????

LOUISE: Why not now??

MISSY: Why not?

ERIC: Could it be now??

DICK: God with us.

MISSY: God within us.

ERIC: O God, you have done great things for us. You have looked upon your people. You have not forgotten us. You have been merciful and kind to us from the beginning.

DICK: You have acted with power and done marvelous things: You have brought the lofty down a peg or two, showing them they don't know everything. You have made the one who feels worthless feel like they are somebody again.

MISSY: You feed us, and care for us, giving us enough for all, if we learn to share. You have never abandoned us! You have been here all along!

[PAUSE]

DICK: It doesn't matter "when." TODAY is a good day to prepare for God.

LOUISE: It doesn't matter "who" you are. God came for everyone.

MISSY: It's the "why" that matters. God came in Jesus to show us how to be human. To share what we have. To make friends of strangers. To forgive those who hurt us. To accept the gift of life God so wants to give us. To enjoy friendship with the Divine.

ERIC: To prepare a way into our own heart for Christ to rule.

LOUISE: The Word of the Lord: EVERYONE: Thanks be to God!