

*Pastor Jana Schofield
Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA
Second Sunday of Advent
December 5, 2021
Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6*

This week I watched for the third time the excellent film “Revitalizing Cultural Knowledge of the Nooksack River” by Lummi documentary filmmaker Althea Wilson, that many of us watched during Lent this year. The parts that especially struck me this time were the interviews Althea did with members of the Lummi Nation who recalled memories as children of the Nooksack River flooding—something we all can relate with the past few weeks.

Once or twice a year, the Lummi people knew that the Nooksack River would overflow its banks, especially at their fishing village. They were certain about it, they anticipated it happening. Some of those in the film described the water going up to their windowsills. They would put a net around their firewood and nail it to the house so the wood wouldn’t drift away.

One described looking through a knothole in the wood of the floor where they could see the Nooksack River directly underneath, which would signal it was time to roll up linoleum and put their shoes on dresser.

The late Lummi Nation Chief Bill James told the story of his dad admonishing him on certain nights to sleep with one foot on the floor. “When your foot gets wet,” his father said, “it’s time for us to go.” They kept a boat tied to their doorknob when it was flooding time so that they could escape before the water got too high. And when water went back down, the house was full of mud, so they would drill hole in floor and use a hose to rinse out the floor and build a hot fire in the house to dry it out.

What struck me is the anticipation of the Lummi people. They were certain every year that the flooding would happen. They knew it would be a life-changing event, and so they prepared

for it. Anticipation led to preparation which led not only to survival, but also to a future with hope.

Anticipation and preparation define the season of Advent. The light on our Advent wreath grows brighter each week as we anticipate Christ’s coming. We prepare our hearts for Christ’s birth during these four weeks.

But anticipation is more than just knowing Christmas comes after the fourth candle is lit; and preparation is far more than just hanging decorations and baking cookies.

Anticipation is the act of believing that what is coming is more than what is; and preparation is living into that reality now. Yes, it could be anticipating a flood and getting ready for its coming, but it could also be anticipating a new future, and trusting that the reality is near and living into it right now.

That is how Luke, the physician, wrote about anticipation and preparation in the gospel we heard today. Luke tells the story of John, a prophet who was also Jesus’ cousin, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. But to tell the story of John, Luke places him in his historical context:

John lived 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 Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.

Luke’s original hearers who were living in Roman-occupied Palestine around the year 30CE would have known exactly what those names meant: it meant living under an emperor and governor who squashed dissent and worked only to extend Rome’s power. It meant being under the thumb of Herod’s family who murdered and beheaded those in opposition, including members of their own family. It meant having high priests who worked only to keep those in power in power.

Basically, it meant living during a time when there was despair for the disenfranchised and little hope for a different future. Yet it was into this reality that John proclaimed that there was

something else to anticipate: a time when 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. A time when life will not be full of despair but bursting with hope.

So John admonished his hearers: prepare the way of the Lord to do this—make Jesus' paths straight to get to you—to your loved ones—so that you can experience that reality now.

I think I want to pause here to ask you, do you believe and anticipate this? Do you trust John's promise that there is something more than this—something more than a world controlled by the coronavirus, something more than the political clashes and infighting we see, something more than inequity and exclusion, something more than the grief or emptiness you feel?

Do you anticipate that Jesus can usher in a new reality? Do you believe that Christmas can be a life-changing event? Because if that's what we are anticipating, that's what we're going to prepare for.

In next Sunday's gospel, John's followers ask him "what then should we do?" How do we prepare? And I can guarantee that John doesn't answer "deck the halls with boughs of holly." Here's what John says:

Share your coats and food with those who have none, be fair and treat others with respect, do not take from others. To prepare for an anticipated future when every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, you love one another.

Just like Philippians says in our reading today: to prepare for the day of Jesus Christ, let your love overflow, like the banks of the Nooksack. The way that we prepare for an anticipated future when all will be whole is by living that future now. We are Christ's hands and heart and feet to usher in a time when the rough ways will be made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. We anticipate it happening, and so we prepare for that reality by acting like it now.

I hope and pray in these remaining two weeks of Advent that you prepare the way of the Lord not by getting caught up in holiday stress, not by worrying that if we don't carry out every Christmas tradition—in our homes or in even our church—that Christmas won't mean as much. But heed John's call to prepare the way of the Lord in this way: love, share, trust the inbreaking of God into our broken world, and create the conditions for Christ to come.

Like sleeping with one foot on the floor like our Lummi friends did anticipating a flood, be that alert and anticipate that Christ's coming will usher in a new reality. Because in the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high *shall* break upon us and guide our feet into the way of peace. Amen.