

“Flat Earth Society” (5Dec21)
Luke3:1-6; Baruch5:1-9; Phil1:3-11

I know some of you who can hardly hear these words without breaking into Handel’s *Messiah*, pulsing with the melismas of “ev’ry valley shall be exalted, and ev’ry mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight, and the rough places plain,” on into the grand chorus: “and the glory, the glory of the Lord shall be-ee-ee-ee-ee revealéd, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it!”

With that grand traffic alert, both from Luke’s introduction (quoting words of the prophet Isaiah) and from Baruch in our first reading, we have depictions of rural development projects.

Except this wasn’t in the trillion-dollar infrastructure bill. Our usual and ever-escalating concept of roads through remote areas tends toward accessing the population centers and popular sites. From the Oregon Trail’s remaining Conestoga wagon wheel ruts to the first cross-country travelers in automobiles, on to getting kicks on Route 66, because it winds from Chicago to LA, to having that (as you know from the movie “Cars”) eclipsed by Eisenhower’s interstate system, and still not enough, awaiting three lane construction to finish on I-90, we expect highway projects to be about getting from city to city faster and smoother. It’s a rare road indeed, like the Gunflint Trail, whose destination is to terminate in wilderness.

Luke and Isaiah and Baruch, however, don’t see these wilderness roads as expressways for leaving no-man’s-land in the rearview ASAP, though, nor as dead ends. They see this as the place God arrives.

That’s highlighted exactly as Luke starts this main part of his Gospel by listing from the very tippy top the esteemed elites: the Emperor Tiberius, governor Pontius Pilate, rulers Herod and his brother Philip, and Lysanias, plus high priests Annas and Caiaphas. That’s where power is: with the rich, in the imperial metropolis, in palaces, in the temple. All claimed divine right and godly identity.

But after that big list of people and settings, the

citadels and capitals and religions built upon mountaintops, where does God appear? Far from it! In the wilderness, out making a way with John the Baptist. It’s a shocking contrast. It’s not where God is supposed to be.

So is proclaimed the leveling project of access to God’s work. All those high places will be brought down. From John’s wilderness vantage point along the Jordan River, at the low level of the Dead Sea, everything is up, and a long way up the mountains to Jerusalem and the temple, and a long metaphorical climb to the thrones of power. They must be brought down. Earth needs flattening.

Well, in Luke’s Gospel, Mary the mother of Jesus had already sung before his birth that God has “cast the mighty down from their thrones and uplifted the humble of heart.” God is working on a great demolition program, not literally of tearing down the natural resources of wilderness to pave paradise, but for human society and against the high and mighty who attempt to block access to God’s goodness. God is “making the crooked straight”—language still all too apt for the cheating self-interested insiders. Instead, “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Now, you may observe that the crooked are still not going straight, that the powerful haven’t been brought down, and that you yourself feel left out.

So we might confess that some of God’s great construction and public works project, the equality and sharing together, isn’t yet complete. But “could the world be about to turn?” (ELW 723) For what it’s worth, Paul also said to the Philippians, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion.”

More, for what God is preparing, the completion isn’t by putting you on cruise control toward establishing glimmering new mountaintop experiences or reversing the institution of hierarchies. This isn’t even striving to become the city of God, the shining city on a hill, as is popularly imagined.

This may not even be a road out of your predicament, since it is about God who comes into the wilderness, finding access to you there. You may be there in these wandering days that prolong

to years in the wilderness through the pandemic. Your regular life may feel far from power, from beauty, from the insider connections. You may feel pretty insignificant, or generally bewildered and lost, without direction, like you can't quite fix the potholes or even locate a dirt path.

So God comes to find you there, here, now, not waiting for you in some far off, heavenly high place, where things are cleaner and holier and in better order.

This is God in the unexpected place. In the scrub brush along a muddy river. In the dark valleys. With exiles yearning for restoration of community. In a splash of baptism that proclaims your wrongs have been righted, that you again have a new beginning. The almighty God will appear in wilderness the birth of a baby, and among this motley assembly of believers (and doubters, we must note), and in the wilderness and wildness of a smidge of bread, far from anything glamorous or glorious, God promising to be hidden and found by you, clearing all obstacles to come straight into you, so that in your flesh and with all flesh, you may see salvation.