



First United Church of Oak Park

Simply to Prepare

Luke 3:1-8

The Rev. John Edgerton

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One Art by Elizabeth Bishop

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

A Reading from the Book of Luke, Chapter 3

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.” ’

The days around Christmas and New Year’s are an odd, in-between time even in the most ordinary years. What is there really to do that cannot wait until people are back after the first?

Even Ebenezer Scrooge had to admit that even to attempt to be open for business would be useless since there would be no one to do business with. People are traveling, or recovering from hosting travelers. The longed-for delight of Christmas has passed by and left us feeling worn out and in need of a rest. Not because the thing that has passed was secretly burdensome, but because even if engaged in the most delightful labors our bodies will grow weary, our spirits need to rest.

This time, this in-between time, it is baked into the pie of our religious observances as well and has been for a long time. We used to call it the twelve days of Christmas—existing now mostly as a song—marking the very short liturgical season that is Christmastide. It begins on Christmas and runs until the day of Epiphany, which is January 6th.

This year, Christmastide is observed as many times as it possibly can be by the church—twice. And today, I wanted to read for you two lovely pieces about these sorts of in between times. The first was the Art of Losing, a poem shot through with the beautiful ordinariness of what it means to be alive, and to know the preciousness of all things when and because they have slipped through our fingers. The other is a passage about John the Baptist. John, who is my namesake, practices his ministry at an in-between time, too. Jesus has been born, but has not yet begun his ministry. Something new is to break forth, but it has not yet. John goes forth to proclaim that people ought to prepare. To prepare for that new way.

You can’t have the good news of Jesus Christ without the proclamation of John the Baptist.

I am always wanting to jump to the end of things. To find ways to be efficient and reach the conclusions that are best, the outcomes that are best, the results that will justify the effort. But John the Baptist calls people to prepare. And preparation, it is almost no one’s favorite aspect. It is the rare musician who prefers practice to a well-rehearsed, well-received performance. It is

the rare preacher who prefers the hours of study and confusion and wondering over the time when some clarity has been achieved.

But the entirety of John the Baptist's message is just this: prepare. Prepare the way of the Lord.

This is not an easy message. Because I am always wanting to jump to the end of things. To find ways to be efficient and reach the conclusions that are best, the outcomes that are best, the results that will justify the effort. The Scriptures and indeed God's good creation shout out a different truth, a truth deeper than the comforting illusion of any supposed ending.

That truth is that times of preparation, that in-between times are important on their own. Times of rest are worthy on their own and not simply as coin to buy productivity later. We see this in the Sabbath, that time itself is to be divided by rest. Sabbath does not exist to serve the rest of the week, all of time exists to hallow and sanctify rest. And if once a week were not enough to remind me, I am reminded every day when the night's beautiful velvet darkness enfolds the world, making rest something a joy in itself. Night is not merely an empty space between days. To turn night into the servant of day is to give up forever on the gift of dreams, to discount the visions we read of in the Scriptures.

And there is, of course, Christmastide. An in-between time. Today is the last day of that in-between time. The last moments of that pause. So for now, I want to give you just one minute. One minute when you can simply breathe into this in-between time and know that it, and you, are enough. Let it be a gift.