

“Let’s Get Ready to Rumble!”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
December 8, 2024 - Second Sunday of Advent

[Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6](#)

“Let’s Get Ready to Rumble!” Michael Buffer first offered this now-famous catchphrase four decades ago when announcing boxing matches for ESPN. He has since invited competitors and spectators alike to get ready to rumble at professional wrestling matches, a host of other sporting events, and even in a handful of Rocky movies. So popular has Buffer’s catchphrase been, he had it trademark in 1992, and has since then earned more than 400 million dollars licensing its use. Ready to rumble indeed!

I doubt that the prophet Isaiah or his estate saw similar monetary success from his uttering of his own contest-commencing call, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord,” as it has echoed again and again through the ages, including by us today as we read John the Baptist quoting the more ancient prophet Isaiah’s exhortation. But I’m sure that Isaiah is quite OK with that, for his call for people to get ready for a big event to begin, just like John’s use of it in his time, was never intended to be a money-maker. Rather, what Isaiah and John hoped for, and what they surely would have considered to be a sign of their success as messengers, was transformation in the lives of people as they changed their ways in anticipation of God’s coming presence and reign on earth.

John was certainly prepared and ready to rumble. Today’s gospel reading from Luke tells us that when he received a message from God in the wilderness, he began to call people to repent, or change their ways, and be baptized as an act symbolizing the cleansing of their minds, hearts, and actions and God’s renewing forgiveness in their lives. This, for John, was how people would get ready to receive God’s presence in their lives and to prepare the world to be receptive to more of God’s gracious presence.

But not all people living in John’s day were interested in having God reign in their hearts and in the world. We heard a list of such people in the gospel lesson. First among them was Rome’s emperor Tiberius Caesar, who cared about growing his own power and certainly did not care to see more of God’s reign be realized on

earth. Likewise, Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, which, in the days of John's preaching and baptizing ministry, had just become an official Roman province, had no interest welcoming in more of God's reign. Nor did the children of Herod the Great and others who ruled over the Rome-dominated client states around Judea. Nor did the Jewish high priest Caiaphas or other leaders of the Rome-dominated temple in Jerusalem. All of these characters were interested in unjustly growing their power as they dominated over people rather than welcoming in the just and peaceful reign of God. Repenting of their domineering ways was the furthest thing from their minds, and they would not have just ignored John's call, but they would have actively used their power to try to silence him or any others they considered to challenge their rule.

Ready for the fight, though, John the baptizing prophet proclaimed his message in the wilderness. Far from the centers of human power, God's message came through him to the people around him, who changed their ways and their identities as they welcomed God's reign in their hearts. And before his work of calling people to prepare a highway into their lives for God's presence and reign was done when one of the Herods took his life, he tapped his relative Jesus to take his place in the ring and to continue the struggle against the earthly powers opposed to God's reign by proclaiming the good news that salvation was at hand and by showing by his own powerful acts of love that the deep valleys of despair and hopelessness were being filled and that the high mountains and hills of the arrogant, self-serving ways of earth's rulers were beginning to be brought down.

We pray for the coming of the day when God's promise given through Isaiah and John, that the lofty will be brought low and that the lowly will be lifted up, will be perfectly realized and that all flesh will see the salvation of God as people dwell together in peace. And we work for the peace of that good day to be better realized in our day. For Jesus, into whose way and identity we have been baptized, tapped us in to continue his struggle to bring down the lofty and lift up the lowly and to see more of God's love, peace, joy, and hope reign throughout the earth.

But are we ready to rumble? Or would we rather just enjoy being in our own lofty places and expend our energies making them even loftier?

This Advent, let us recommit ourselves to continuing the struggle to tear down the lofty things that stand against God's way. Let us do that in our own hearts, minds, and actions, and let us do that in our work here and the work we enable around the world. May we each carry our little, shining light into the world's darkened corners, and may we join them together to burn brightly, bringing light and warmth to even the darkest and coldest of places.

When, in our struggle, we face off against powers that seem so much greater than we are, let us not give up hope or be frozen in fear, for in our corner, calling and enabling us to shine on and fight on, is the One who conquered chaos to create this good universe, who now cheers us on to continue the good work of creation and re-creation. As the apostle Paul, who took up the struggle in his time, wrote to the struggling followers of Christ in the imperial capitol of Rome, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

God is indeed for us; may we struggle on for God, today and always. Amen.