Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In movies and shows depicting wealthy people and their parties, including political leaders and countries, when someone enters the main room, often a ballroom before the descend the stairs of their opulent place there is someone who will yell out their names and their affiliation. For example, they might say ” introducing King and Queen Gustofson of Sweden” or “introducing the Duke of Earl,” as the guests part their way to allow them to join the grand affair with this grand entrance. Now the servants can serve champagne and over the top canapes as they idly chat and gossip, mostly about themselves and their previous get together and rub elbows with the hoity toity, while the servants do their best to wait on them and take care of their every need. Typically, there is an opulent meal where the host and hostess designate who sits with who. It is a veritable who’s who of society. The servants do not join in the revelry or meal like the people of wealth or position or trying to get position (think Mrs. Bucket, er I am sorry. They will be reminded it is Mrs. Bouquet even though it is spelled bucket.) Today’s story is about the one who proclaim God’s Son, the Savior of the world that will bring hope to those whose lives did not have hope. In ancient times when the king was to take a trip messengers went ahead so they could prepare a road for them. John was proclaimed by Isaih who introduces him as one who prepares the way for the Lord. John however was in in the limelight as proclaimer to prepare not the road but to prepare people’s hearts and lives to prepare for the coming king, the Messiah.

Here’s the thing. John is not an opulent ballroom with expensive paneling and decorations or paintings on the wall and there are no servants scurrying around to take care of every need. This is in the wilderness. John is the servant. John serves himself, dressed not in a tuxedo and bowtie with well-polished shoes but rather a camel hair coat and sandals and has a diet not of champagne or canapes or pheasant under glass but rather eats of locust and wild honey. There is no valet to lay out his clothes and help him get dressed in finery nor chefs nor servants. But this is the point. The one who John is going to proclaim does not have a position held in high regard by important people and religious leaders. John is not the idle rich. John depends on God for his very subsistence as a servant to God, to carry the mission God desires, as he is an obedient servant. There has not been a prophet for over four hundred years but John’s location in the wilderness and simple clothing and diet is mindful of prophets of old. This is a hinge in history between the Old Testament and the New Testament by preparing the way of the Lord which is a fulfillment of the new covenant or testament where God provides a King forever from the line of David. The kings God had sent had a habit of living well while forgetting the poor, the thirsty, the hungry, the homeless along with the naked and less fortunate so God steps in to give us a permanent king, worthy of our worship who will show them love and justice juice for all people, not just some but all people. In this geopolitical landscape, JB is not idle at all. He is busy baptizing those who had no hope come to him as they hear his words of hope. If their narcissistic, self-centered king will not give hope they look for a king who gives them hope. They no longer need to spend their hard-earned money for sacrifices at the Temple that did not work. Unlike the servants we were talking about before, John is not careful in his words. God is not happy with a status quo that hurts so many people and makes them fill hopeless. John is so confident and grounded in God he exhorts others to be baptized in the water and to and to repent, meaning turn away from sin, John even yells, calling them a brood of vipers. People were so hungry for what John was telling and offering to them through Christ and people came from all over and message goes over well, so well that it gets the attention of the earthly and religious leaders who benefit from the status quo. John is a prophet who is filled with the Holy Spirit, “great in the sight of the Lord,” and someone who prepares for the Lord not by introducing Jesus as “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior of the world” but by a message of repentance, salvation, and forgiveness. John does not want the attention on himself but rather on Christ.

We are told of the prominent rulers in John’s time. Tiberius is the Roman Emperor who the people of the day view him cruel, perverse, and self-indulgent. Ironically, it was all about keeping the peace through Pax Romana, even if they had to defeat or kill to keep the peace and this was effective in peace keeping. However, this was in sharp contrast to the peace to the kingdom Jesus was to proclaim. Pontious Pilate was the governor of the province of Judea and his role placed him in charge of Jesus’ trial and death to keep the peace with the religious leaders. His brother Philip ruled other regions. It was Philip’s wife that Herod married, which led to the demise of John. Annas and Caiaphas had the high priesthood during this time and would call for the death of the one John heralded since he threatened the status quo. Think of the people at the fancy parties that had the wealth and were honored and sat at the best place at the table. Herod, the son of Herod the Great who was so cruel he ordered the death of a son on his deathbed because he thought he would be a threat to his power. People who have power will go to great lengths to keep their power at all costs without consideration of the effects it has on people. That’s why working for justice is necessary is always an uphill battle. Luke’s list of rulers positions his story in history as it sets up a contrast between their rule and the way of Jesus. These leaders represent power, influence, and widespread practices of dominance and greed. John’s ministry exemplifies the stark contrast that Jesus’ life, message, and ministry will have with the powers of their day. overconsumption, materialistic accumulation, indifference to inequities, ungenerosity, superficial spirituality, arrogant judgmentalism, and characterizing our neighbors in the worst possible light. Where would John’s prophetic critiques focus today? The practices in which we engage are acts of allegiance to cultural and ethical norms, however unspiritual they may appear. John had the gall to call such things out. By quoting from Isaih, the prophet is showing that Christ is not just for the Judeans but as Isaih says as he says, “all of mankind will see God’s salvation.”

We focus on another kind of peace than the Romans. When I was growing up, we had great anxiety about war. WWII had ended but we then entered the Cold War and concern of a nuclear holocaust. People and businesses put in bomb shelters and in school we would have a drill where we would get under a desk and put our head between our legs. Nobody questioned how this would be helpful. You could not survive in a bomb shelter to outlast the half-life of radiation and being in the defensive position in school would not really protect you from a nuclear blast. I think these things were important because it showed we were all involved in same way for survival and would reduce our anxiety but being reminded I thik it actually increased my fear and anxiety. Of course, our real survival of hope is in our Savior and the peace we share during worship. This is the peace that exceeds human understanding. We focus on the Prince of Peace. During Advent we anxiously await Jesus coming to us as our focus not by frantic busyness and materialistic generosity, but by a recalculation of our actions and an openness to a Savior who comes among us still as we take in the real presence at communion and how we deal with others. We focus on him, listen to and respond to his words and respond obediently as we carry out our mission for God. It helps when we decorate the sanctuary to give a hint in what is to come. Daily devotions, our mid-week get together, and Bible Study and prayer also focus us on the future. One way to deal with our anxiety is by serving others. We do this by feeding others, helping the homeless, giving to our adopted family. Contributing to the food pantry, etc. Our children’s Christmas program is also a great way to be centered in Christ. We can also demonstrate love by loving one another, being graceful in our forgiveness and inviting and welcoming others to our faith community. The reality is love is demonstrated when we have worship that all can come when they feel it is necessary and feel welcomed and accepted just as we are, the same way God holds each of us in high esteem and loves us how we are. Peace on your continued journey during Advent as we wait peacefully and patiently for the coming of our Lord and Savior. Amen.