

C Advent 2 12.5.21

Luke 3:1-6

Focus Statement: God is flipping the world upside down and inviting us to join in the transformation.

After reading our Gospel lesson this week, I texted my best friend. "It's been a few years since we've been in Luke, and I forgot just how much that guy likes to name drop!" I mean, listen to this: "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..." That is an impressive list of who's who of the ancient world. These would have been the power brokers, the names to know, the people who are doing things. This was also the classic Greco-Roman style of writing important history, you would date the event in question to the reign of influential rulers of the time. In this way you were imparting the importance of whatever event you were discussing; that it deserved coverage on the same level as power brokers such as these.

Then at the end of this list, Luke offered up this strange bait and switch. "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 Ituraea, and so on... the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." We know the name of John the Baptizer, so it's easy for us to miss this shift, but for Luke's audience, they are whiplashed by this pronouncement. For Luke's audience, this sentence sounds something like this: "In two-thousand and twenty-first year of Our Lord, when Joseph R. Biden was president of the United States and Xi Jinping the president of China, when Beyonce was the undisputed

queen of pop, and Tom Brady the greatest of all time, and Paul Rudd the sexiest man alive, the Word of God came to Jim son of Frank in Bellevue.” Wait, what? Who??? Placing “guy from Bellevue” in this list of A list celebrities is exactly how weird John the Baptizer in the wilderness sounded to Luke’s audience.

And it isn’t just that Luke dropped “John in the wilderness” in the middle of this list of power, but it’s the way Luke dropped him. If the list of high-powered celebrities is how history was ordered in the Greco-Roman world, “The Word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness” was the formal way in which prophets were announced in Hebrew scripture. This very specific formula is how all prophets were identified. The first verse of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, you name a prophet, it starts like this. We read Malachi as our Old Testament reading today, it starts: “An oracle. The word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi.”

What Luke did with this introduction is he placed John on par with the great power of the day and the great heroes of old. This person you’ve never heard of, Luke said, this person from a backwater corner of a forgotten part of the world, this person is as critical, as important, as world changing as any great name you might drop from either the past or the present. Luke backed up the weight of that declaration by quoting from the prophet Isaiah.

Little history for you on Isaiah because you know how much I love some history. We think of Isaiah as one book, but it’s really three books, from before, during, and after the Babylonian exile. First Isaiah starts in Judah in the 800s BCE. For the wealthy and

powerful of Judah, everything seemed to be going great. The economy was booming, society was flourishing, and everything seemed generally awesome. That is, they were awesome if you were wealthy. Isaiah came warning the power players that things were not as they seemed. The nation of Judah was in a cycle of severe economic inequality. The rich were getting richer and the poor poorer, and Isaiah warned that this was weakening the nation. If you do not start caring about the poor, Isaiah warned, the whole nation will collapse.

Isaiah chapter forty, where Luke was quoting, that collapse had occurred. Babylon had conquered Judah and those rich and powerful leaders were now in exile in Babylon. At which point Isaiah took on a very different tone. What had once been harsh warnings of “change your ways or else” was now a message of comfort. Yes, you screwed this up, Isaiah told his audience. Yes, things are very bad. Yes, you are in exile, yes, your world feels like it’s fallen apart. But here’s the good news, God is still with you. God is still moving.

By quoting Isaiah, Luke was helping his audience make the connection between God’s presence in history and God’s presence with them. Because like the time of Isaiah, the people of Luke too were under control of a foreign power. Luke’s audience too was facing vast inequality, as the rulers and leaders stayed in power while the weak suffered. By quoting Isaiah, Luke wanted his readers to see that the God who was with their ancestors is still with them.

And dear people of God, guess what. What was true for the people of Isaiah's time, what was true for John's audience and for Luke's, that too is true for us. In the midst of our uncertainty, our fear, our inequalities, injustices, and concerns, God too is with us. I keep hearing echoes of the Gospel from last week, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

And what is that promise? Isaiah, and then Luke, promise: "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 one you least expected, the one who's name seems out of place has come to announce the undoing of all your expectations. At Bible chat on Wednesday, Pam pointed out that this passage is about everything becoming opposite, and that's exactly what the kingdom of God is. It is salvation born in a manger, it is light and darkness not opposites but companions, it is life that comes out of and after death. This message is as timeless and true today as it was for Luke, John, and even Isaiah. God is leveling hills, filling valleys, making crooked ways straight and rough places smooth, so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

But wait, you might point out, rightly. Isaiah promised this reversal, John brought it, Luke preached it, but looking around, I still don't see it. There is still a lot of hurt, pain, brokenness, a lot of people who are not yet included in the declaration of "all." This is where John shifts from being a wild declarer of good news to a leader, teacher, and guide

for us. This passage becomes for us an invitation to follow John's lead in being about the upheaval of the kingdom of God. To be about the work of leveling the hills and filling in the valleys, of straightening the crooked and smoothing the rough, until all flesh is included, until all flesh is valued, until all flesh is made whole. This passage is nothing short of an invitation to follow the lead of John the Baptizer to make good trouble in bringing about the kingdom of God.

And so, dear people, here's the promise. God is with you. Just as God always has, just as God always will. God is with you in the work of bringing about the kingdom of God. Follow the wild lead of John the Baptizer and let's see where we are headed. Amen.