

C Advent 2 12.8.24

Luke 3:1-6; Philippians 1:3-11

Focus Statement: We get to be a part of God's work.

We're into the second week of Advent, time for John the Baptist! I've shared before that John is my favorite underappreciated holiday character. I feel like Hallmark is really missing out on a line of John the Baptist themed greeting cards. Preferably a scratch and sniff, so you really get that experience of unwashed camel and locusts, dipped in honey for just enough sweetness to make it really unpleasant. Luke's Gospel doesn't actually give us the physical description of Matthew and Mark, so we don't get the same camel detail. But John is every bit as aggressively grumpy in Luke, as we'll read next week. This Sunday, we just get the introduction.

Well, the introduction of the adult John. As readers of Luke's Gospel, we already know the origin story of John son of Zechariah, because Luke told us in the first chapter. We know how "in the days of King Herod of Judea"—note reference to important players on the world's stage— "in the days of King Herod of Judea" John's birth was foretold by an angel to his elderly parents, who thought they were well-past childbearing age. Then, six months later, when Mary came to visit, having experienced her own visit from an angelic messenger, John leapt within Elizabeth's womb at the joy of greeting the zygote that would become his savior. And we know from the last verse of chapter one, that after John was born, "the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel." And then we leave John for a time, the story turning to Jesus, with chapter two outlining Jesus' own birth and childhood.

Now in chapter three, the child who has been “in the wilderness” reappears on the scene. Luke opens with a historical reference to let us know thirty years have past. In chapter one, it was “the days of King Herod.” Now it is “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,” in this time when all these great and powerful rulers were ruling and commanding, standing in watch from their thrones and palaces in important places like Jerusalem and Rome. In this time of big personalities and even bigger egos, “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah” whom we know to be the surprise son of a minor priest in the middle of the Judean wilderness.

In this week’s Bible chat I got on a long tangent about the differences in ancient calendars. And I confess I tried to do it again this morning. At one point this sermon had a full page and a half of me explaining the Gregorian calendar, which is ours, as well as the origins of the Roman, Hebrew, and Egyptian calendars. I saved you from that. But if you’re curious, catch me after, I can tell you, because I wasted a lot of time on Thursday learning a lot of interesting but ultimately unimportant information. The point of all this is, by grounding this event in history, by placing John at the end of this list of powerful names Luke, as he is wont to do, makes an important theological case about the story that is about to unfold, which is that it is history. That is, to quote theologian Troy Troftgruben, that “God brings about salvation not in the abstract or in theory, but through concrete events, real people, in actual places of history—with Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension being the quintessential example. God saves not in Neverland or “somewhere over the rainbow,” but

in history. Corrupt, messy, and complicated as historical events and situations are, that is where God saves.”

But even beyond anchoring John, and eventually Jesus, in history, by placing John in this list of power players, Luke demonstrates the contrast between the kingdoms of these rulers and the coming Kingdom of God. Everyone knew who these names represented, empires of control and domination, rulers more interested in consolidating their own wealth and power than the lives of those over whom they ruled, systems of greed, self-service, and inequality, where the powerful have everything, and the rest fight one another for scraps.

And before we get too far knocking the culture of first century Rome and Judea, let us remind ourselves that bible stories remain relevant because they are not historical stories as much as they are human stories. They are stories of the way people are and how God acts to bring about redemption in and among and, sometimes, in spite of, God’s wayward creation. Luke’s list of rulers was meant to anchor John in a particular time and location, but we can just as easily replace those names with our own. With modern day leaders, rulers, and elite, the politicians, religious leaders, and tycoons of industry who spar and grapple for power, and how we too end up following in their example, working at cross purposes with the God who wants nothing but for “all flesh to see the salvation of God.”

And into this mess of conflict and struggle marches a most unlikely of messengers. A prophet who proclaims not “look at me” but “look at him.” Next week we will hear John say how he is “not worthy to untie [even] the thong of his sandals.” This week, Luke grabs our

attention by calling on another beloved ancient prophet. John is, in 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.’” John comes announcing a call to “prepare the way” for all that shall be done. Prepare for the day when “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 smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Here’s a thing to know about Luke right off the bat, Luke is the great equalizer Gospel. Luke is all about bringing down the mighty and lifting up the lowly so that everyone can meet as equals. We’ll hear this in Mary’s song in a couple of weeks, but it’s a theme throughout the whole Gospel. To the point where, you know Matthew has the Sermon on the Mount? Luke has the same sermon, but it takes place on a plain. Luke is super into this idea of a level playing field.

So there’s that. But there are other important points to catch in this quote from Isaiah. It makes clear that John is the messenger, not the Messiah. John is the messenger, not the Messiah. He’s not even the one making low the mountains or filling in the valleys. He’s the one doing the preparing, he’s the forerunner, announcing the great things of God that are yet to be fulfilled. This is what makes John such a great role model for us, for the church. John is not Jesus, he knows that. John’s job, his purpose, his holy work, is to announce Jesus, to point to Jesus, to show the world all the miraculous and salvific things which Jesus has come to accomplish. This too is our work. We are not the levelers, the unfolders, the savers. We are the workers, those called to be part of the great work which God has been about since time immemorial, and which God through Jesus has already accomplished. Our work is John’s work, to point the way. So that “all flesh shall [one day] see [experience, be

part of, live] the salvation of God.” This is a message for all flesh. This is another key part of Luke’s Gospel, both incredible Good News and impossible challenge. All flesh means literally all flesh. It means precisely the people we think maybe aren’t included. It also means us. On our best days and worst days, when we’re walking the walk and when we’re falling far short, the salvation of God is for us as well.

Dear people of God, this advent, and every advent, John invites us to be a part of pointing the way to the work which Jesus is already about in our midst. To prepare hearts and minds, including our own, for a world in which everyone is included and equal, as all flesh see, know, and understand themselves to be a welcome and valued part of the salvation of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.