

Title: The Word in The Wilderness
Text: Luke 3: 1 – 6
Date: December 09, 2018

For those of you who are comforted by patterns, you might like to be reminded that we are always introduced to John the Baptist on the Second Sunday of Advent. You might wonder, however, why this introduction is cluttered with this litany of historical figures.

I suppose the simple explanation is that it is a reminder that in our Christian tradition it is important to see that God messin' with human history is set in a historical context. Of all the gospels, Luke makes a sincere effort at self-consciously being an historian. Beyond that, however, I suspect that there is additional significance to the particular names mentioned.

Dr. Gardner Calvin Taylor was a well-known preacher of a prior generation who once had a congregation as large as 10,000 in Brooklyn, NY. The grandson of emancipated slaves, he grew up in the segregated South, and became a close friend and mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr. When he preached on this passage he put Luke 3 in what was then a contemporary context. He said, **"Dwight D. Eisenhower being the president of the United States and John Patterson the governor of Alabama, J. Edgar Hoover the omnipotent autocrat of the FBI, Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale, the high priests of middle America, the word of God came to Martin Luther King in the wilderness of America."**

You see how that changes everything in terms of what we read into this passage? Luke makes it very clear how convoluted and tightly wound this situation was: he includes a large number of roman rulers scattered throughout Judea and the realm, several of whom will make appearances elsewhere in Luke-Acts, as well as two Jewish leaders listed as high priests. In this way Luke signals the tension between the Roman realm and the Jewish religion, a tension compounded by the ambiguity within the religious leadership itself.

So how would we re-write Luke 3 in our time? **"Donald J. Trump being the president of the United States, and Matt Whitaker being the puppet acting Attorney General, Rudolph Giuliani the ubiquitous and loquacious defender of the present order; Franklin Graham, Paula White, and Joel Osteen the prophets of American civil religion, the word of God came to preachers in the wilderness of West Virginia on the Second Sunday of Advent in 2018."** Now *that* would make you sit up and take notice! You see how these introductions might not be wasted words?

We would expect the Word of God to come in shiny cities with towering skyscrapers. We would expect the Word of God to come on the campuses of well-groomed, well-endowed seminaries. We would not expect the Word of God to come in the wilderness to a strangely clad wild man with an odd dietary regimen. What's up with that? Is God's Word suspicious of political and ecclesial power? Is it searching for the alienated, the disenfranchised, and dispossessed – like Martin Luther King, Jr. did, or William Barber does?

We could also read into this a commentary on power. Those with worldly power normally gravitate towards the comforts and sophistication of the city, where whatever power they have is amplified by the accoutrements of power. Conversely, most people avoid the wilderness; but that is exactly where we find John, who actually exudes spiritual power. Case in point, when you actually have the spiritual power of John, it is abundantly obvious whatever the setting.

Forgive me if this is too obvious, but the wilderness is . . . the wilderness. It is not the suburbs. You cannot see the city from the wilderness. There was something so unfiltered and fiery about

this person John that people left the cities to go hear him preach in the wilderness. First by the hundreds, then by the thousands, people walked ten or twenty miles out from their cities, into the wilderness, to listen to this desert prophet. I mean, that is a long way to walk for a sermon. His sermons were not urbane, nor were they sprinkled with good jokes. People didn't come because of the great choir or familiar hymns where all the verses were sung. They didn't come because they had some desire to see old friends that they hadn't seen all week, nor because of some childhood habit they couldn't quite kick. No, they walked twenty miles out into the desert because they wanted to see a rare phenomenon. They wanted to see a man who had been totally immersed in God, whose soul had not been corrupted by the pollution of the cities, whose style had not been groomed by a seminary. They wanted to hear an authentic Word from the Lord. They didn't want to be tantalized; they didn't come to be entertained; they didn't come to hear some thought-provoking religious wisdom. They came because they wanted to hear an authentic Word from the Lord for their lives. The people from the city wanted to find whatever he had found in the desert, and what they were unable to find in the city or the cities of life.

Since we quote Richard Rohr a lot here, it might interest you to know that *The Center for Action and Contemplation*, which he founded, chose John the Baptist as their patron saint. John the Baptist is the prophet who rejects the system without apology. Like the native peoples of New Mexico, he goes on his vision quest into the desert where he faces his aloneness, and his naked self. As a result he discovers a message with such clarity and surety of heart that we see in him a surrendered man. Always pointing beyond himself, ready to get out of the way, finally beheaded by the powers that be, John represents the kind of liberation and the kind of prophecy that we need in our affluent culture. He is not just free from the system, he is amazingly free from himself. These are the only prophets we can trust.

John's unique job description is in preparing the way for Jesus. When we know someone is coming, we start to see things through new eyes.

Some of you know that my wife and I had house guests for a few weeks in October. When we knew that we had company coming we started to see things through new eyes. Though I had been reasonably comfortable with things for a while, when I knew we had company coming, all of a sudden it became embarrassingly obvious to me that I needed to get the bathtub re-glazed. When I knew we had company coming, I could no longer put off replacing some missing ceiling tiles. Preparing for company causes hosts to examine their surrounding with a whole new perspective. And preparing for guests demands self-examination as much as it involves a "to do" list.

John the Baptist calls us to see things from a new perspective. John's challenge is to repent and prepare. True repentance (*metanoia* in the Greek) literally means to change one's mind, turn around, reorient oneself. (This is much different than feeling sorry for naughty things we did.) For now, we'll leave this as a concept. Next week we will look at this with some more specificity.

Luke brings to our awareness a passage from Isaiah 40:

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

**'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'"**

These words were spoken to those in exile, assuring them that their time of oppression would end with God's rescue. Though the road home seems daunting, the ongoing call is to prepare the way of the Lord. Be encouraged, however, for the rough ways shall be made smooth.

The final verse of today's text makes me stop and think: **"All flesh shall see the salvation of God."** So often when we hear John's call to repentance, we have been trained to hear it through the lens of privatized religion. The church has always taught me this personalized version of repentance. Could it be, however, that John is calling for the whole world to change – spiritually, economically, politically, and socially? Could it be that John is a direct threat to imperial theology and power? After all, enlightened spiritual gurus who transform individual spirits, and leave the social order uninterrupted, don't tend to get beheaded by the state.

"All flesh shall see the salvation of God." To me this is a reminder that a cosmic vision is being lifted up to frame our thoughts – a vision that transcends my getting my personal act together. Isaiah's soaring poetry is cited to cast that grand vision. Every time we use God to prop up our imperial politics that enshrine privilege, God comes behind to fill in the valleys of our violence with peace, and to straighten out the crooked calculations of the oligarchs.

Can you join me in waiting? Can you join me this Advent in believing that the time will come when – somehow – all flesh will see it together? And may this belief inform our actions.

Amen

Luke 3: 1 – 6

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.”