

## ADVENT 2C

December 6, 2009

*Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ*

---

Malachi 3:1—4   Luke 1:68—79   Philippians 1:3—11   ***Luke 3:1—6***

---

Last Sunday was the beginning of a new church year for us. As I've mentioned before, our cycle of Scripture readings runs in three-year cycles, imaginatively named Year A, Year B, and Year C. Year A's readings center on the Gospel of Matthew, Year B is Mark, and Year C is Luke. We are now in Year C, the year of Luke.

These second and third weeks of Advent *every* year, however, feature the readings about John the Baptist. And Luke has some unique things to say about John.

Today's message is about context. First of all, remember that Luke begins his Gospel by saying that he is writing an orderly account of the life of Jesus. And, he's writing to his friend Theophilus, a Roman.

And so in today's reading, Luke begins by setting the historical context. He sets the ministry of John the Baptist within the context of Roman rule: the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate is governor, and Herod is ruler of Galilee. He also sets John's ministry within the context of the Temple – it's during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.

Now you'd think this would be sufficient for us to be able to precisely pinpoint when the ministry of John the Baptist took place. But the current calendar did not come into use until the year 533. Our year of 365 days and 12 months was not standard in the first century; there were at least four different calendars back then. So our best guess at a date for these events is some time around the year 28.

Then the next words of Luke: The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. This is standard verbiage for the call of a prophet. Luke is clearly setting John the Baptist within the ranks of the prophets of old. And, we're told that his ministry took place in the wilderness. This is a very important tie-in with the last chunk of text that we'll look at in a little bit, but it also serves to remind the people of their own wilderness wanderings as recounted in the book of Exodus.

Next Luke tells us: He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is the main thrust of John's message throughout his ministry – that one needs to repent and be baptized to receive forgiveness. Luke makes it very clear later in his Gospel that John's baptism put one on God's side, and quite possibly in a right relationship with God. But Luke also makes a clear distinction in his Gospel and later in the book of Acts between John's baptism and Christian baptism. We'll hear more about the content of John's preaching next week.

And then, finally, we have a direct quote from the Old Testament book of 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 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.”

Every time the Old Testament is quoted or referenced in the New Testament, the purpose is to immediately set the context for what is coming next. These references are intended not only to remind the people of something from their history, but to also tell them that what is happening now is set within the context of that history and is a fulfillment of Scripture.

This quote that Luke uses is from Isaiah 40. This section of the book of Isaiah was written during the time that the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. It was during a time when they yearned to return to their homeland. This text, in its original setting in Isaiah, was intended to provide encouragement that God would bring an end to their exile, and that God would clear the way for their return to the promised land through the wilderness between Babylon and Jerusalem.

What could Luke's purpose possibly be in quoting this bit of Scripture from Isaiah? What does this tell us about the kingdom of God, and its fulfillment in Jesus?

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

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain 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.'"

Luke's purpose in using this text as a precursor to John the Baptist's ministry is to highlight the upside-down-ness of the kingdom of God. Valleys will be filled, mountains made low, the crooked will be made straight, rough ways made smooth.

The coming Messiah is all about turning the world upside-down. Everything that the world tells you is true and right and honorable is not what the kingdom of God is about. The kingdom of God is not about power and wealth – those people Luke referenced at the very beginning of today's reading; the kingdom of God is about a little child born to poor parents in a back-water town far outside of Jerusalem. It's about a man who will turn everything you think you know upside-down.

This is what John the Baptist is all about: Prepare for this cosmic reversal! John's message is not about John himself; he is just the forerunner. He's coming ahead of the one for whom people need to prepare – the long-awaited Messiah. Preparation means self-examination and repentance, in preparation for the coming kingdom.

So how does this text speak to us, who are seated comfortably in our warm sanctuary, relatively prosperous and at peace in our lives? It could just be that this text *should* be speaking to us when we think we need it least. Are we people who are wandering in a wilderness, and maybe don't even know it? Are we so comfortable that we have come to believe that concepts like sin and repentance are 'passe', having no relevance for our present lives?

I would certainly hope that's not true for any of us here today. But the truth is that many people in our society think that sin is an antiquated notion, and that those of us who seek to reveal sin to the light of day and repent of wrong-doing are nothing more than simple-minded religious zealots. The sad truth is that those very same people are wandering in a wilderness of their own making, alienated from God, because of a self-centered self-righteousness that refuses to acknowledge the sovereignty of God.

None of this sounds like particularly “good news” today, does it? Maybe that's why John the Baptist wasn't too popular with the powers-that-be in his time, either. Preaching the need to recognize sin and repent of it was never a very popular message.

It is said that a lot of people come to church wanting to be assured that they're good people. They don't want to hear that they are “by nature, sinful and unclean,” as one of our old confession liturgies put it.

As we continue to journey through Advent, as always, I encourage you to use our silent moments during confession to seriously examine your heart. And, if you don't find anything to confess, then perhaps it's appropriate to ask God to reveal to you the ways you've fallen short.

This is why John the Baptist's message is important – not only in his own time, but ours as well. Only people who recognize that they are sinners in need of salvation will be prepared to receive the gift that God offers. I'm not here to tell you that you're a good person. Somewhat like John the Baptist, my job is to remind you that we're all sinners in need of a loving God. We need to repent so that we may see the promised salvation of God. And rest in the assurance that God loves you.

Amen.

<1,377 words>