

Sunday, December 9, 2018
Second Sunday of Advent (Year C)

Luke 3.1-6

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In our readings for today, we see how salvation history builds from the ancient past to the present. Malachi foretells the coming a messenger to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. That messenger is John the Baptist, who himself points to the coming of Jesus. We then move on in time to Paul's words of encouragement to the Church in Philippi, urging the early followers of Jesus in that place to continually move in faith into the future. We are that future. In so doing, these readings set us firmly in the arc of salvation history.

When it comes to our spiritual and religious lives, our living within this arc of salvation history, it may be tempting to view this part of our lives as something separate, set apart from, what goes on in "secular" history. Separate and apart from what goes on in the world "out there." That there is God's vision of what history should be, of what our place in history should be. And then there is what is actually happening in history—often times contrary to God's vision.

With this view, we here in the safety of the Church go about our religious practices and developing our spirituality, our relationship with God, on a separate track from what happens outside these walls. That the two tracks—salvation history and secular history—may be happening side-by, but each have their own trajectory. That our goal is the culmination of salvation history which promises the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, while secular history is going in the opposite direction: to hell in a handbasket. Why else would there have been need for the likes of John the Baptist, who "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Lk 3.3)? Obviously, things were heading in the wrong direction and needed turning around.

Of course, when we step back and take a broader view, we see—we know—that secular history and salvation history are actually intertwined. That there are key moments of intersection between the two. Moments where salvation history overlays itself on the rest of history, influencing the events of the latter. The beginning of today's Gospel reading is one such moment, one such intersection.

"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" (Lk 3.1-2). This statement clearly indicates one key intersection between salvation history and secular history. Placing the person and the story of John the Baptist in a historical context. Pointing to the specific moment in time and space when John the Baptist began his ministry. Based on the information provided, we know that this beginning occurred about the year 27 of the Common Era.

And given his fundamental role of being the "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord'" (Lk 3.4), this placement of John the Baptist in a historical context

also places Jesus in a historical context. As one commentator notes, “By listing authorities in the Roman Empire and in Jerusalem’s temple staff, and by setting John the Baptist in the wilderness near the Jordan River, Luke presents a detailed setting for Jesus’ adult life and ministry.” (*Sundays and Seasons: Preaching, Year C 2019, Advent 2, 12/9/18*).

More importantly, this statement puts God’s breaking into humanity at a very specific place and time. It places God’s breaking into humanity not just in historical context, but also in a very particular socio-political context in which the people live under the oppression of a foreign occupying force where they are treated as second-class citizens, at best. And this statement places God’s breaking into humanity in a particular religious context in which the established religious authority of the land is corrupt, hypocritical, and self-serving.

This is a time of religious and political crisis for the people of Israel. Because of living under Roman occupation, because of the duplicitous and corrupt actions on the part of the Temple authorities, the people’s identity has been called into question. Their identity has always been defined by place and by their relationship with God. And now, they have no land, and their connection with God is tenuous, at best. They are struggling with the nature of faithfulness to and identity before God. They are longing for the coming of the Messiah to set things right.

But you will notice that the word of God announcing the impending arrival of the Messiah did not come to political leaders such as Tiberius or Pontius Pilate or Herod. The word of God did not even come to religious leaders such as Annas and Caiaphas. No, the word of God announcing the coming of the Messiah came to commoner named John.

You will also notice that the impending arrival of the Messiah was not announced in Rome, the capital of Empire. Nor was it announced in Jerusalem, the center of Judaism. Rather than be proclaimed in palace or temple, the word of God was proclaimed, of all places, in the wilderness, in the remote region around the Jordan.

None of this is accidental. Judging by the introduction to our Gospel reading, it appears that God’s word seems to bypass those who are not receptive, those who are not open to hearing that word, those who would be threatened by God’s word. It seems instead of the word of God being given to the high and mighty, to the powerful, delivered in places of power and prominence, God saw fit to have his word proclaimed to and by a commoner—one who some might even consider a bit eccentric for his choice of lifestyle—in an out of the way place.

And what was this word of God? We are told that John “proclaim[ed] a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Both baptism and repentance are significant to John’s message, to God’s message. As to baptism—this was a ritual cleansing, symbolic of washing away one’s sins. In John’s view, baptism carried with it the deeper meaning of submission to God and renewing one’s allegiance to God’s will. It meant inclusion within the restored people of God—inclusion among those who choose to refocus their lives on living according to God’s word.

Which brings us to repentance. Repentance is more than an invitation to personal piety or moral living. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which means to turn one’s life around. To do a 180 and head back from whence we came. To get back on the track that God

desires for all of us. In light of the context in which it was placed, John's words are not just a personal invitation, but a calling for the entire world to repent, to change, to be turned around. In all ways: spiritually, economically, politically, and socially.

To further emphasize the significance of what John was doing, what John was proclaiming, his activities are placed in the context of salvation history by paraphrasing 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'" (Lk 3.4-6) This image of wilderness is itself significant. It is a reminder of Israel's formation as a people—as the people of God—during the exodus out of Egypt. Wilderness is meant to be an image and commentary on the state of where we are as a people: lost and wandering, seeking to find our path, seeking to find our way back to God. This passage is meant to provide hope for restoration in a new exodus.

The religious and spiritual landscapes of our own day are not too different from that of the time of John the Baptist. The specific issues may be different, but the trends are not.

Our society is becoming increasingly lost spiritually. When it comes to religious and spiritual grounding, nearly one-quarter of Americans are classified as "nones"—having no religious affiliation. And among those under 30, that number is over one-third. And those percentages have been steadily increasing over time.

Our society is becoming increasingly divided economically, with greater and greater gaps between the "haves" and the "have nots." For the first time in our history, young adults have less financial security and less potential of gaining wealth than did previous generations.

Our society is becoming increasingly polarized politically, with increased nationalism and extremes in partisan politics, with an accompanying eroding of bipartisanship and a decreased willingness to work across "the aisle."

And socially, we have a myriad of issues and concerns indicative of our increased failure to abide by the most fundamental of God's laws: to love our neighbors as our selves. A social breakdown evidenced by increased gun violence and acts of terrorism on our own soil. A breakdown evidenced by the rise of such movements as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo.

But John the Baptist proclaims a word of good news even in the midst of the social ills of his day. A word of good news that continues to be relevant today, even in the midst of our own social ills. That there is hope. That there is a way out of the spiritual, economic, political, and social wilderness in which we find ourselves. The hope and the promise that God is straightening paths, filling valleys, leveling hills and mountains. That God has provided a way in which we may reorder our world and build a royal highway for the coming of our Lord, in the present and the future. But he relies on us to help make that happen. He relies on us to join with John the Baptist, to be the voices of those crying out in the wilderness, pointing to a better way. Just as John proclaimed the hope and promise on the banks of the Jordan River, so too did the Israelites, after 40 years of wandering in the desert cross that same river into the promised

land, ending their time in the wilderness. Today we hear John the Baptist heralding the coming of Jesus, who enters into the wilderness of our lives, leading us through the waters of baptism, out of the wilderness, and into the kingdom of God. We hear John the Baptist calling us to carry his message—God’s message—into the world.

So, in the style of Luke’s pronouncement – in the second year of the presidency of Donald Trump, when Jerry Brown was governor of California, and Robert Garcia was mayor of Long Beach, when John Taylor was Bishop of the Diocese of Los Angeles, during the priesthood of Michael Fincher, the word of God comes to the people of St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church, calling them—calling us—to be voices in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord.”