

Sermon Dec 10 2006

Luke 3: 1 - 6

“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 priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the Word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight: Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God together”.”

The text for this morning is the first six verses of the third chapter of Luke.

Are you all ready for Christmas?

When somebody asks me that question I must confess that the word “advent” isn’t the first word that goes through my mind. It’s “Macy’s”. I just can’t help it.

But something brings me and brings you back here today.

Something simple and honest.

The need - one more time – to hear the story. The story of a baby born into poverty, who saves the world.

Be careful of this simple story though. It’s a bait and switch. Like almost everything we believe it’s always a paradox. It’s never Either/Or. It’s always Both/And. This simple story of a poor boy made good is not a fairy tale. It is not even a metaphor. It really happened. It is historical. Luke makes this very clear by beginning the story this way:

“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 priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the Word of God came to John.”

This sounds like a guy in a suit standing behind a mahogany podium declaring “In the sixth year of the reign of George W. Bush, when Donald Rumsfeld was Secretary of Defense and Richard Chaney was Vice President...” Etc. etc. etc..

And a girl baby is born in a ditch in Darfur, who is the hope of the world.

Oh, my God. Are you kidding?

When William Sloan Coffin preached on this text from Luke he pointed out the irony of the fact that the beginning of World War II and Christmas were both in December. He contrasts the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to Christmas – the difference between power and authority. Our attraction to Jesus is based on his authority, not his power. Coffin said. “...let us not seek our salvation in the trappings of power.” For “...those furthest from the seat of power”, he continues, “... are often nearer to the heart of things.”

(I love Coffin's sound bites. He doesn't say that those furthest from the seat of power are always nearer to the heart of things. He says "often." He also suggests an anatomical metaphor: the "seat" of power far from the "heart" of things.)

Just as Jesus will threaten the power structure because he is "nearer to the heart of things", John the son of Zechariah will embody the cosmic conflict between the powerful and the outsider – between threat and promise, between sin and salvation.

John is near to the timeless universal heart of things. But the hope he proclaims is spoken at a specific time and the salvation, which all flesh will see, is set in the context of the human sin of collaboration with power. It is fitting that Advent occurs at the cusp of the year when darkness changes to light. Night does not go away. Night does not go away, but the rosy finger of dawn is breaking.

The mysterious paradox that seems to pervade the whole gospel is even evident in the physical setting of this story – "the Word of God came to John in the wilderness."

I don't have much experience with "wilderness". I grew up in central Illinois surrounded by farm fields, running creeks and stands of oak and maple. I've spent most of my life in flat Chicago teeming with people. I've spent maybe three hours of life in a desert. Some years ago I visited a colleague in Phoenix. In the evening he took me out to the desert. It was absolutely beautiful. The sun was setting over a forest of cactus. I stopped to take a picture and my friend walked on ahead fifteen or twenty feet. When I was finished and headed toward him. He said "stop". I was puzzled, but looked on the ground between us and saw a rattle snake curled up and looking at me.

Since then the idea of the wilderness has always brought this frightening image to my mind. The wilderness is beautiful, but dangerous, it is empty and lonely. It is barren of obvious signs of life. It has stunted vegetation and shifting dunes. It's a place without landmarks where you are easily confused and lost.

It is an unlikely place for God. As unlikely as God in a death camp, weeping.

I don't know much about the geography of the desert or the wilderness, but I – like you, I suspect – know a lot about the geography of the mind. I have known dark valleys of sorrow. I have – like you – looked on mountains and hills of necessity that seem unassailable. I have looked ahead and seen only rough, crooked roads. This landscape seems an unlikely place for God to be. A more appropriate place for God is in a green pasture beside a pool of still water. But God speaks to John in the wilderness, to Jesus there in his time and to each of us in days of desperation.

In the wilderness God speaks to John a word of hope and salvation. John is not pushing himself as the Messiah. He's the band opening for the Headline attraction. He's introducing the keynote speaker. The problem is that the headliner, the keynoter turns out to be a baby in a feed trough.

But John knew what he was doing. He ties the coming messiah to the prophets and to the previous glories of the Israelite people. He quotes one of the most beautiful and comforting passages from Isaiah.

"Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain."

(Can you hear that without humming the tune?)

John, however, is not exactly quoting Isaiah. John uses the quote to attach his message to the people's history, but he makes a very subtle change. The text in Isaiah calls upon God to make a clear path through the wilderness so that the people of Israel

can return quickly and safely from their exile in Babylon. John, however, with a delicate change in grammar and punctuation says that he is in the wilderness to announce the coming of messiah who will pull down the mountains of hopeless aspirations and fill the valleys of sorrow in people's lives. And the coming messiah will straighten the crooked policies of the power elite.

What an incredible message of hope this is! How desperately we need and long for that to happen.

What if all those mountains of fear and piled baggage of failed relationships were just half as high?

What if the valleys of sorrow and loss were not as deep and what if justice filled the deep chasms of inequity in this country –

between the hungry and the full, between the housed and the homeless,
between the private rooms at Northwestern and the waiting rooms at Cook
County,

between the Porsches and the bus stops?

What if all these valleys were filled to overflowing?

And what if politics for sale could be purchased with the widow's mite?

What if the problem of war could be solved by the mother of a dead soldier?

Good Lord, how desperate we are for the fulfillment of that message of hope that John cries in the wilderness.

I suggested in the beginning, though, that this whole hope thing is a bait and switch. Actually, it's more of a reality check. The hope which John offers is of a free gift from God that is coming. A gift with no exceptions – all flesh will see it together - , unlimited mercy. A gracious act of God. But John also knows that in our humanness and our grounding in this real world says that a free gift is implausible. So, in order to understand this divine forgiveness a person, a nation must acknowledge the need for it. Simple confession. There is a verse in the Luke passage – just one sentence – squeezed between the list of the power structure and Isaiah's hope, a verse that says that John was proclaiming "repentance for the forgiveness of sin". Again, the mystery of the paradox. An unconditional gift with a confessional condition.

So we are asked in these first two Sundays of Advent to wish for, to hope for, to expect, to anticipate love right in the midst of confession that is so costly to our self-esteem. What a mysterious and wonder filled faith we profess. We know that God will prevail and we also know, as Bonhoeffer says, there is a Cost to Discipleship.