

The Politics of Advent

Luke 3:7-18

INTRO:

Last Sunday we met John the Baptist . . . again. John is the one who introduces Jesus the Christ. Today we will hear all of John's sermon about Jesus, including what Jesus means for those who expect to meet the Messiah when he comes. Luke shares the story of John the Baptist during the Roman occupation of Judea. Luke is too wise an artist to say plainly, "**Now I am going to tell you a story with some very real political significance.**" Luke just tells a story about some ordinary, first-century people in a violent and dangerous world. The story of the incarnation of God in Christ has political implications. The Christ comes into the world, our world, a world full of violence.

ME:

I think we could use a little bit of the peace of Jesus in this crazy world. I expect to experience it this Christmas.

YOU:

Do you expect it? Or, **is this just another Christmas overwhelmed with commercial traditions?** They add a lot to Christmas, but they don't add

peace. God, through John, can help us with this. Open your eyes, and your ears to hear . . . now:

Let's pray as we prepare to experience the peace of Jesus...

GOD:

Luke 3:7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." 10 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" 11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." 15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his

granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” 18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

WE:

I mentioned Homer’s Iliad last Sunday. You can’t just pick up Homer’s old book and read it without some help. The Bible is a very old book too, *with the newest parts being two thousand years old* ! When you’re reading something that old, it helps to contextualize what you are reading. Let’s spend a few moments putting Luke 3 in its context.

- Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus was the successor of the greatest of the emperors, Augustus Caesar. He was named emperor on September 14, 14 BC, and fourteen years later Luke’s Gospel begins. Tiberius objected to accepting the title of “**God**,” though he heartily encouraged continued worship of his stepfather Augustus. So, when the Gospels refer to “**Caesar**,” they’re talking about Tiberius.
- Now, Tiberius appointed Pontius Pilate as the governor of all of Judea, and it was then that Herod (a Jew) was assigned to be in charge of Galilee. Pilate watched Herod who watched his own people on behalf of the Roman forces. Pilate is of course vilified in the New Testament — what would you expect from Jews who were suffering under the heel of the Roman forces. Some historians say that

Pilate was probably a typical representative of the Roman government occupying Judea. Pilate was probably not a bad guy, just a typical lackey for the emperor in this outpost of the empire. Pilate did what he had to do to keep the Jews quiet. And it worked. Sure, there were some issues — but Tiberius, Pilate, and Herod had proven to be an effective occupation administration.

- And it wasn't the government alone. They had support from the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. These worked with Herod and Pilate to keep everything as smooth as possible up at the temple.
- High priests used to served for life. But now the Romans installed and removed high priests whenever they wanted to make sure that none of the Jewish leaders dared to challenge Rome. The Romans graciously allowed the Jews to practice their religion. As long it was under the supervision of Annas and Caiaphas. As long as nobody mixed religion with politics or dared to question the idea that the God of Israel was all well and good, and as long as Israel's God knew that Augustus Caesar and his stepson were the real power in Judea.

Then Luke writes, “**God’s word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.**” Literally in the Greek it says, “**The word of God *happened to John.***”

The word of God — the long-awaited, eagerly listened for word of God happened to “John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

John’s Gospel says that the “**Word was God.**” So then the Word, God, came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. Now, historians can tell you all about Tiberius. They can tell you all about who Pilate was. They can tell you all about who Herod, Annas, and Caiaphas were. **But who in the world is this Zechariah? Who is his son John to whom God, the Word, happens?** Maybe *because* John, son of Zechariah, is working out in the “**wilderness.**” Unlike Annas and Caiaphas, John does not preach in the center of Jerusalem, in the temple. A few verses later, when John calls the congregation “**snakes**” and dumb and dead as “**rocks,**” you can see why he couldn’t get a church anywhere, except way out in the Wilderness. **Isn't it ironic?** Here were trained religious professionals, spiritual experts — Annas and Caiaphas — working in the temple, at Israel’s “**national cathedral,**” looking for the “**word of God.**” And the Word, *God in the flesh,* came to the **unknown, untrained, and unauthorized John,** son of Zechariah, who was living off locusts and wild honey in the wilderness.

What a way to begin . . . a Gospel. What a way for God . . . to get close to the world.

Pick up a morning paper. You won’t read about people like John in places like the wilderness. You will read about politicians and powerful people in places like Washington, London, and Moscow. Take a college course in

world history. You won't study about anybody *but* politicians and powerful people. It's famous people like Tiberius, Pilate, and Herod who make world history. But for Luke, when it came time for God to make history, God came to none of them. In the wilderness John quotes the prophet Isaiah with some beautiful poetry about making straight the highway of God, lifting up the valleys, and bringing down the mountains, translated:

“God is coming and the whole world is going to change.” “All humanity will see God’s salvation,” says John.

And that's wonderful, except we all keep forgetting that the “**salvation of God**” is not the **salvation** we thought we wanted. Not only is salvation larger than a *personal relationship* (*because it is nothing less than cosmic*); but also salvation is preceded by a wild man on the margins. A fierce, demanding preacher of righteousness who is “**John son of Zechariah.**” John's message is pretty simple and direct:

*“**Messiah is coming.**”*

Messiah is a political designation for a political leader who will come and confront the Romans, who will thereby give Israel a different future. **And to whom and to where will Messiah arrive?** He will come out in the wilderness, among ordinary, not in any way powerful people. And that's good news for us because, most of us are not all that powerful. Our church building may be beautiful, but it is no one's idea of a national temple. And it was to people like . . . us . . . that John preached. Saying to them that the

long-awaited Messiah was coming to them. And John answered their question, “**What must we do?**” He gave specific ideas, telling them things they could do in their ordinary lives that would make them part of the coming kingdom. Sometimes you come to church and you get the impression that following Jesus is really an extraordinary thing. Church is where we come to rise above the filthy realities of earthly life and become “**spiritual.**” Luke’s Gospel goes out of its way to show us that the Messiah **entered** this world and **confronted** the problems of this world. And Luke begins the story of the Messiah with the story of John the Baptist. John, preaching in the wilderness, says that if you want to greet the Messiah, if you really want to be part of his kingdom, fine. Then pay attention to what you do with your money and be willing to change the direction in which you are headed and turn into another direction when needed. You already have all that you need in order to follow the Messiah, right here, right now. And maybe that’s why John’s sermon, as rough as it is, is called by Luke “**Good news.**” **Gospel.** To all of you who live ordinary lives, in rather ordinary, everyday ways, with all kinds of injustices and cares and worries, there is good news. Messiah is coming and he is coming to you. He calls you where you are to follow him as you are and, in the process, to be what you can be. This news is . . . good.

THE SERMON IN A SENTENCE:

Messiah is coming, so believe, pay attention to life, change and turn when needed.

YOU:

Are you ready for Christmas? Are you ready? John says Messiah is coming . . . to you! You are enough, you have enough, just pay attention, believe, turn and change when and where the Spirit leads you.

CLOSE:

I read that John the Baptist serves a Messiah who comes not only to help us but also to go head-to-head with the political powers that be. This suggests that Christians ought to be profoundly uneasy when the Christian faith is easily meshed with the presumptions of the modern nation. On September 14, 2001, in the National Cathedral President Bush said: **“But our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.”** And in his State of the Union address, January 28, 2003, as we were mobilizing for war in Iraq he said to the nation: **“Once again, we are called to defend the safety of our people, and the hopes of all mankind. And we accept this responsibility. . . . We do not know — we do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life, and all of history. May he guide us now. And may God continue to bless the United States of America.”** The war began fifty days later, on March 19, 2003. America lives with the promise and peril of what Robert

Bellah has termed “**civil religion**” — defined by Gerhard Sauter as “**the transfer of religious symbols into national self-understanding.**” HH. Stephen Shoemaker, *Being Christian in an Almost Chosen Nation: Thinking about Faith and Politics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 24

Luke ends his talk of John with a brief reference to Herod Antipas in verses 19 and 20. It is Herod who finally imprisoned and cut off John head. But we should pity poor King Herod. He’s not as important or as powerful as he thinks. Herod can’t shut John up. The word of God has come to John in the wilderness. A wild fire has flared up out in the wilderness, among the marginalized and the lowly. It is a fire that will ultimately sweep toward Jerusalem and consume the whole world. The Word has **happened** to John. Through John, and Luke, the Word has **happened** to us too. May the Word happen **through** us this advent.

Let’s pray God to the Word together now...