

Advent 2C

Dec. 6, 2009

Luke 3:1-6,

Where is Jesus?

I'm sorry to be the one who has to tell you this but it appears that **somebody has stolen Christmas!** Now I'm not talking about the *Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, (which happens to be my favorite Christmas special). This theft has nothing to do with missing Christmas trees or packages or a huge sleigh pulled by a little bitty dog. No, what is missing this morning is even more alarming than that. Somebody seems to have taken Jesus! Not only is the baby Jesus missing from the altar nativity set but the man Jesus is missing from the gospel text!

Instead we hear about a guy named John who lives in the wilderness and wants to "right" the roads of the world. Nothing crooked - nothing too high or too low - and the rough places need to be made smooth. Yeah, good luck with that John. In the first century, the Romans were the road-building specialists and they employed thousands of people and had the backing of an Empire. How in the world is this nobody, son of Zechariah, going to do all of this? And what does any of this have to do with the coming of God into the world as a baby in Bethlehem? Do we really need John to travel on the road that leads to Jesus?

Perhaps the road, the path, the way, John is preparing is not one made of stone and cement. Perhaps the hills and valleys and crooked places that need some attention are not "out there" somewhere but actually very close to home. **Perhaps** in our rush to prepare for the coming of Christmas, we are in danger of missing Jesus altogether. That is why even today, nearly 2000 years later, we still need to hear from John as we live with expectant waiting for the coming of Jesus.

Luke wants us to know **when** John began preaching but remember last Sunday when I said time was complicated? The ancients didn't count time using our calendar. Our system of counting time backward until the birth of Jesus and

forward after that didn't begin until several hundred years after his death, and we know that the monk who calculated when Jesus was born, made a mistake. King Herod the Great died in 4BC so Jesus was born no later than that and likely a couple of years earlier. If you have bought the hype about the world ending in 2012, you should relax because that year has already come and gone!

Luke's purpose is not to set an exact date by modern standards. He wants to set the ministry of John within the real history of human events. By doing so, Luke shows that John is a prophet in the tradition of the prophets of old. They too were set in history relative to the political and religious events unfolding in the world. They too preached from the wilderness, unattached to the people and the powers they often spoke against. These prophets were not fortunetellers who predicted the future. They were sent by God to get people out of the ditch and onto the right road again. They told people the consequences that awaited them if they continued going in the wrong direction of injustice and idolatry **and** they reminded people that God is always waiting with a promise of forgiveness and blessing when people return to the right way.

How many of you have seen the movie "Apollo 13?" It's an amazing movie documenting the real-life saga of a failed attempt to land on the moon. While in route, the lunar capsule has suffered the failure of vital systems and the three astronauts on board are in danger of not making it back to earth. To conserve all of their power and stay alive, they shut down their computer. As they came back toward earth, they discovered they were approaching at the wrong angle and had to make a course correction. With no computer to guide them, they had to fire the rockets and attempt to steer the capsule manually. The margin for error was excruciatingly small. Too steep an angle and the capsule would burn up. Too shallow and the spacecraft would bounce off the atmosphere into space. The only guide they had was earth. Keeping the planet in sight through a small window, the pilot performed a timed burn and managed to make the right correction to return to earth safely.

The prophet John comes to prepare people for the way of Jesus. John pointed people in the right direction; he urged them to make life corrections so they would not be stuck going down the wrong road. Making course corrections, changing directions is at the heart of the word "repent" and that is the message John preached. It means to change your thinking, to alter your course. God is at work in the words of the prophet to get people back on course, and to point them to the one beacon who will **become the way for us** to get back to God. Jesus may seem to be missing from our text today but he is not completely out of sight. John is pointing to him when he says, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God".

God is intent on saving the world from every kind of death we bring upon ourselves. And that includes our deadly tendency to think we have no need of John, no need to prepare the way for Jesus, no need to make corrections to the course our lives are on. **But perhaps even more deadly is our capacity to think we are able to make these course corrections on our own** – that we can somehow become better than everybody else – more holy, more pure, more right. If that is the case, then we really don't have to worry about the fact that Jesus is missing from the text (or from our lives) because we have no real need for him anyway.

Showing us our need for God's mercy is the primary purpose of John's message and it is a message we need today more than ever. When people get too carried away by the rampant commercialism of this time of year, they often quote the saying, "Jesus is the reason for the season". But how does Jesus give purpose and courage and hope to our lives? Is it his birth to a young Palestinian woman over 2000 years ago? Not by itself it isn't. **The birth of Jesus as God AMONG US in the flesh - means nothing without the death of Jesus as God FOR US on the cross.** Without the death and resurrection of Jesus, the birth of a boy to a peasant woman would be a non-event, a forgotten byline in the history of peoples.

John comes to us even today to remind us of that fact. The “way” God saves us, the object God would have us keep in our sights is not a manger as much as it is a cross. The health of a church is visible not by the attendance on Christmas but rather by the attendance on Good Friday. That is the day we should really order our calendar around because on that day, our need for God’s mercy met God’s willingness to love us in spite of our failings and our faults. **And that grace changes us.** Even before his birth, John’s father Zechariah sings of the new life God offers in Jesus Christ.

“In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Light and peace are something the world is in desperate need of right now. We don’t trust one another, we have little regard for others when we are polarized by a political climate of exclusive rightness that extends all the way into the church. John comes to both call us to account for our actions and to point us to the direction of the one who has the power to save us. We will hear more about the specifics of John’s message next week. So you will have to “tune in next week for the conclusion” of this message. In the meantime, let us go forth this week with the words of John echoing in our head. “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Let each of us turn again to God in repentance so that we might again see and know - Immanuel, God with us and God for us so that God might work **through us** to bring light and peace for others.