

Year C, Advent 2
December 6th, 2015
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Luke 3:1-6 and Philippians 1:9-11

Dawn Breaks Upon Us

Here is the question; why does Luke go into so much detail when describing the setting for his story?

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.

An incredible sentence! Luke goes to great lengths to give us a precise geopolitical context for something that is happening in history. At a particular point, in a particular place, inhabited by particular people something begins to happen. For Luke this something is hugely important—so important that Luke believes Isaiah wrote about it centuries before:

“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.”

When the interstate road system was begun during the Eisenhower administration the nation prepared the way for a new and more vital economy by making the roads straight, filling the valleys, lowering the hills and paving over the rough places. Now we drive on the interstate through the Cascade Mountains, across the prairies of Nebraska, over the marshes in Florida and through the Badlands of South Dakota. This system of level roads has changed the face of our nation. But what Luke refers to here is something **far bigger than that** and it’s something for the whole world.

Rome was the one who built roads. Their engineers plotted a straight line toward their destination and then crews built the roads. If mountains were in the way they were removed, if valleys were too deep, they were filled. Nothing stopped them. Is Luke offering an alternative to Rome?

Roman roads were built to bring the Legions who brutally imposed their “peace”. Is there any other way for peace to arrive? What form would it take? How do we grasp on to it or is it an empty dream? It’s so tempting these days to just give up and dull ourselves with drinking parties and the anxieties of day-to-day life—no larger vision to keep our head up for. On this second week in Advent we need something to pull our eyes away from the grim realities we see around us.

John, son of Zechariah, who lives in the wilderness on the edge of civilization, suddenly emerges and proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He sees that humans have a terrible problem that needs straightening out. Something within human

thinking has gone terribly wrong and hearts and lives have become sick. John the Baptist thinks humans need forgiveness from God and repentance; that is, change of mind on what they are doing, a change of direction. He asked people to publicly act to confirm their intention to change and many were baptized.

John the Baptist, looking from his place in the wilderness on the edge, could see that people were destroying the very community they needed. If this destruction could be washed out of them, if they could renounce their desire to best their neighbor, and insure their own success at their neighbor's expense, they would find peace.

John himself has disciplined his desires and now lives in the wilderness dressed simply and surviving off the land. He has renounced his desire to best his neighbor. He has chosen to live outside normal culture with its hierarchies founded on the bodies of those at the bottom. Do black lives matter? Are all humans of worth, even those in the third world who live far below the poverty level? And so he preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Their sins were all the times they had made themselves the center, their own desires more important than their neighbors, and not noticed that God stands as an upholder of the ones buried at the bottom.

“John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins.” Convicted people everywhere pledged themselves to try harder by submitting to John's baptism. It was a sincere movement and quite popular – but it didn't work. John the Baptist could change behavior for a while but his message of trying harder didn't change hearts. Something more, something different, was needed. What would it be?

The apostle Paul knew what it was. He preached it all the time. The story of the death and resurrection of Jesus contains all humans need to change their hearts. Jesus, God's Son enters history as a vulnerable child, he grows into full manhood and preaches love and forgiveness and shows it in his actions toward all people, even the people the culture looked down on. When Jesus behaved with this kind of compassion, the self-centered people not liking what Jesus showed them about themselves condemned him as a common criminal. They killed an innocent man, and in killing him they killed God. This happened so that we would all see what we do. It's key to human anthropology. Pogo was right, “I have seen the enemy and he is us.”

What is the penalty for killing God and killing each other? Surely God will avenge the death of his son and all the people of the earth we have killed. By the law of tit for tat we deserve to die but the punishment never comes! Instead of the sword of justice the resurrected Jesus says “don't be afraid. I come bringing peace.” Your cycle of violence has been broken and I give you the power to forgive in the way you have been forgiven. We are all candidates for death row whose sentence has been utterly commuted. God has done it out of mercy and because he is love. The story of how he did it is true and has the power to change hearts.

The people of Philippi have tasted this power and their hearts have begun to change. Paul hopes their growth will continue and so he encourages them with these words, “This is my prayer: that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of

insight.” Did you catch that? He prays their love will grow in richness, not that they will be rich but that their love will be rich. He prays they will be knowledgeable and full of insight. Insight sees the connections; how what we do impacts our families, friends, communities and the world in indirect ways that we probably haven’t thought about. There is so much we could do that we don’t see. For example, what would it say to our neighbors if we sold something we didn’t need and used the money to support an Iraqi refugee at this particular time in history? Would it help in lowering the mountains and filling the valleys?

Paul’s love prayer continues. “I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really matters and so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of Christ.” Paul wants the hearts of his people to be in the right place when time is up, whether cosmic time or our personal time on this earth.

Paul goes on, “I pray that you will then be filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God.” He prays they will continue to move away from self-centeredness and me-me-me to actions that give glory and praise to God. He wants them to escape their bondage to themselves and find life in serving others.

Friends, this morning we have been exposed to real knowledge and insight on human anthropology and on what we can do to bring peace. Luke says our salvation begins when “*by the tender mercy of our God; the dawn from on high breaks upon us, to give light to us who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet on the way to peace.*” So be it. Amen.