

Sunday 5th December, 2021
2nd Sunday of Advent - Year C

Malachi 3:1-14
Psalm: Song of Zechariah
Philippians 1:1-11
Luke 3:1-6

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

In Advent the prophets remind us that God is preparing a way toward us and for us to travel on and that we like the prophets have a role to play in proclaiming that for others. “All people will see the salvation of God”. All people. So says John the Baptist today. And as I hear it, I wonder. All people? Really?

It really depends, it seems, on your religion. It depends on those with whom you are associated. It depends on your race, your ethnicity, your gender, your sexual orientation. The list of criteria for salvation, contrived predominantly from our many fears, is long according to the world as we know it today, but not according to the Gospel of Luke. And since Luke is providing a particular portrait of Jesus, not according to Jesus either.

According to the incarnation, if we take it seriously, there can be no selectivity when it comes to those for whom God comes. This is the promise of Advent -- that those we might write off on our way to the manger matter to God. In becoming human, God committed God’s self to all of humanity. All people, friends. All people.

And in a way, it’s not only the words of John the Baptist telling us this today, but it’s also the way that Luke constructs his Gospel. I’m sure it didn’t escape you that we have included in the Gospel today a long list of the who’s who of the Roman Empire, the bigwigs of Ancient Palestine.

Why does Luke do this? I think he does this for 2 reasons. Firstly, he is locating John, and ultimately Jesus, amid the history of the day. He makes bold claims, that is, he says that these events - about as small and insignificant as you can imagine - deserve to be placed along side the world-shaking people and events of the day.

“Really?” Luke dares his readers to ask, what does the birth of two small children or the ministry of misplaced prophet have to do with kings, emperors, and governors?” And his reply: “Everything!”

But more than that, he’s also setting John and Jesus *against* these so-called people of authority and power. Previously Luke has mentioned one or two of powerful people. In these verses he mentions seven, and as you read the list aloud it sounds like an ominous litany or loud and insistent drumbeat marshalling the political, economic, and religious powers and principalities to war:

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...

And against all these stands paltry, insignificant John, son of Zechariah. Well, not quite: against all these stands paltry, insignificant John, son of Zechariah...and the Word of the Lord. The word, as Isaiah said, that fills valleys and levels mountains, that straightens out what is crooked and smooths over the rough places, all in order to build a direct path by which God can bring us God’s love and mercy.

These seven represent the collective power of the world and against them all stands just John, armed only with God’s word, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and pointing people to the savior who was soon to come.

This is the way it is with the Gospel - it seems so small it’s easy to miss. More than that, God’s mercy comes disguised in human weakness - two vulnerable children who will grow up to change the world, an instrument of Roman torture turned into the means by which God reconciles the world unto God’s own self. Yes, there is always something of the mustard-seed about the gospel - it creeps in, unawares, small and insignificant, until it grows and spreads, infesting whole fields and inviting all kinds of creatures to take refuge in its branches.

So Luke begins his story of salvation by making the outrageous claim that God is at work in the weak and small - babies and barren women and unwed teenage mothers and wild-eyed prophets and itinerant preachers and executed criminals - to change the world. And, to be quite honest, God's not done yet. God continues to work through unlikely characters today to announce the news of God's redemption. It's a promise that's easy to miss, but when we hear it - and even more - when we see it taking place in our own lives - it changes us along with the world.

Luke makes this outrageous claim that the "word of the Lord" comes to this nobody named John in that nowhere place called the wilderness and that small and insignificant thing is more important than all the important people and events of the day.

God chose a nobody, in other words, to prepare the way for God's own Son to come amongst us. And that happens to be a particular theme of Luke that we might well focus on: that God regularly chooses people whom the world sees as insignificant through whom to do marvelous things.

John the Baptist, Mary the illiterate unwed mom and teenager, the no account shepherds at the very bottom of the economic ladder who serve as the audience for the heavenly choir. Again and again, Luke confesses, God chooses people the world can easily ignore to participate in God's world-changing, world-saving activity.

Which gets me thinking. Because I suspect that there are any number of us who feel that we don't hold any particularly important position that would warrant being included in anyone's "who's who list" and yet whom God may be eager to use to do wonderful things.

Might we therefore consider the possibility that we don't have to be celebrities or rulers or among the rich and powerful to be used by God? Might we remember that God is eager to use our talents and abilities and gifts to change the world, if even in what seems like very small ways that are, of course, not small at all to those who receive such gifts?

Might we use this Advent season to particularly see God at work through our relationships, jobs, family and civic life and more to make this world more trustworthy and good?

If so, then we are each called, I think, to remind each other that God is at work in and through our lives for the sake of the world God loves so much.

By the time Luke's community was reading or listening to today's verses, none of those seven powerful people were still alive, yet they were, and we still are telling the story of John and of Jesus, the one John heralds. And today these proud and powerful men are just footnotes to the story of Christ, the one sent to reveal the salvation of God to "all flesh."

So let us not forget that this passage promises to us that whatever might be burdening us at this time will also become just footnotes to a larger, grander, and more beautiful story of acceptance, grace, mercy, and life. The waiting can be hard, however, which is why Luke reminds his community and ours of this promise that is so easy to overlook but big enough to save and audacious enough to transform.

"Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation."

In the name of God. Amen.