

A PARTICULAR PLACE AND TIME

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

December 6, 2009

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.

(Second Sunday of Advent)



ST. PAUL'S

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Lectionary Texts:

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; and Luke 3:1-6

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, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵Every 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; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Those of you who have worshiped here over the years, or at other places that follow the liturgical calendar, know that two of the four Sundays in Advent are about John the Baptist. Advent is about preparation for the celebration of Christmas and in a larger sense, preparation for the coming of the Lord into our lives in all kinds of unexpected ways. John is the character in the New Testament who prepares the way for the coming of Jesus. He is the voice in the wilderness. The reference is of course not about the birth of Jesus, but about the beginning of his ministry. Nevertheless, we think of John in this season as the voice who calls all of us to prepare the way for Jesus to come into our lives in a new way. What will that look like for you this year?

One of the things that strikes me about our gospel reading today is how particular Luke is about the time and place where John and thus Jesus are. So there's no mistake as Luke tells the story a generation or so after the fact, he mentions seven rulers in the short text to set the context for the call of John and the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. Five of the rulers mentioned are secular, and two are religious. Not only does Luke recount people, but places: Galilee,

Judea, the Jordan River, and the Wilderness. Jesus comes at a particular place and time. He is different from the unseen panoply of gods that were a part of the Roman Empire at the time.

It was customary in the ancient world to date significant events to the particular reign of a ruler or emperor. So Luke dates the beginning of the ministry of Jesus to the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius. By the sixth century after Christ and the fall of the Roman Empire, the Christian world would date all things to the birth of Christ. This is 2009 A.D., *Anno Domini*, the year of our Lord, or for non-Christians, CE, the Common Era, but it still dates to the birth of Christ.

It is interesting to me how political this statement is, political in the sense that John proclaims one who is to come who will not only be here for the tiny religious community of the Jews, but one who will seek to reorder life, how we do business for all people. Not only does the naming of an era give way from the year of the emperor to the year of our Lord, but John uses the imagery of the preparation of the coming of a king for the preparation of the coming of Jesus. When the emperor would travel to one of the areas of his kingdom, the road builders would be sent out ahead to prepare the way, to fill in the low places in the road and smooth down the high places so the emperor's chariot could ride more smoothly. Crooked roads and rough roads would have been made straight and smooth. Everyone would have recognized this imagery. And John ups the ante by referencing not just low places and high places, but valleys and mountains. It is a way of saying that someone is coming who is greater than the emperor. And the first words of Jesus in Luke's gospel after he is baptized by John and he leaves the wilderness are a rendering from the Prophet Isaiah.: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lords' favor."

Jesus' words were such a threat to the empire that of course they eventually put him to death. So Jesus, according to the witness of John and Luke, came not just to be a religious reformer, to change worship styles or to alter the liturgy, but to call for a change in the way we live in relation to one another. Jesus has come to reorder life as usual.

John's call to repentance and baptism is a call to a new way of living. John called people out in the wilderness, down by the riverside to live a new way in anticipation of the coming of Jesus. Does that resonate in any way with you and me in our day when Barack Obama is the President of the United States, Rick Perry is Governor of Texas, Bill White is Mayor of Houston, Benedict is Pope in Rome, and Janice Huie is Bishop of the Texas Conference of United Methodists, that is to say in our particular place and time?

Our day includes a war in Iraq, hopefully winding down; a war in Afghanistan escalating; a cautious economy; debate about health care; and a nation somewhat anxious about change. For soldiers who actually fight wars for the rest of us and for people who are without health care or a job or home, these issues are not anxious concerns but present realities.

What would John say to us today? No doubt what he said to people long ago, "Repent and make room for Jesus."

Maybe repenting and making room for Jesus for us looks like knowing what to let go of and what to hold on to in these times. You fill in the blanks for you, but here are some of my thoughts.

Let go of things you can't do anything about. Hold on to that which you know to be true. Let go of anything that is petty, just not worthy of your effort. Hold on to things that are of real significance. Let go of some regret you have from the past. Hold on to some hope you have for the future. Let go of something or someone you hate. Hold on to something or someone you love. Let go of things that are selfish, just about you. Hold on to that which moves you beyond yourself. Let go of things that finally don't matter. Hold on to things that do. I don't know. You make your own list.

John who comes at a particular place and time calls us to repentance, and maybe that looks like knowing what to let go of and what to hold on to. Jesus comes at a particular place and time as well, and he calls us to life and love.

Reinhold Neibuhr saw life as a struggle between love and chaos. He said it is Christ at the center of all things that guarantees that love prevails in the face of every apparent defeat. On this second Sunday of Advent, the year of our Lord 2009, repent and make room for Jesus.