

Sermon on Luke 3:1-6  
Second Sunday in Advent, December 6, 2015  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

The gospel today leads us to do a little Bible study. When you want to know what a scripture passage means, you have to consider what it meant to those to whom it was written, what the writer meant when he or she wrote it, what was going on at the time, and THEN consider what it means today, in our time.

To Luke the Evangelist, the historical context is critical to the meaning of his gospel of Jesus Christ. After all, Luke was a Gentile convert, who wrote his gospel to other Gentiles - in a particular time and place – after the life, death and resurrection of Christ, while the people of Israel and Judah were still living in occupation under the Roman Empire, sometime after Jerusalem and the Great Temple had been destroyed by Roman Legions and the people had been dispersed.

Luke began his story in the days of King Herod the Great of Judea, when Zechariah was a priest of the order of Abijah, and Zechariah's wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. He told of the birth of John the Baptist, the son of a simple priest of the Temple (NOT the high priest, or a king) and a mother, who were not important historically or politically, but simply because they were part of GOD's story – descendants of those whom God had chosen to lead the people of Israel to freedom, for the sharing of God's gift of the Law, and promises of new life. We are introduced to the ministry of this son, John the Baptist, in the psalmody today, the canticle we sung, which is the song of Zechariah at the birth of his son, as he was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of the Lord.

Now, the person of John the Baptist was not at all important in the larger scheme of things in the Roman Empire – he wouldn't be mentioned in history except for the person whom he was preparing the world to meet: Jesus of Nazareth. And Jesus himself wouldn't be more than a "blip" in Roman history, except for what his followers did, and what faith in Jesus – and not the Emperor – led to!

In two-and-a-half weeks we will hear the gospel from Luke on Christmas Eve, when in those days a decree went out from the Emperor Augustus, that the whole world would be registered – in the days when Quirinius was governor of Syria. (Syria? When have we heard of THAT country these days?) And a carpenter named Joseph and his wife, Mary, a descendant of Ruth, and the ancient King David, traveled to Bethlehem, the city of David, to be enrolled, and the baby Jesus to be born. Sorry - I'm getting ahead of the story! But I'm just sharing the context! Today, before Christmas, we are hearing a story that took place AFTER the story of Jesus' birth in Luke 2 – as we read in our gospel the story of John the Baptist's ministry from Luke chapter 3. Just so that you aren't confused!

So in that far corner of the Roman Empire, east of the Mediterranean Sea, in Palestine, a place which most citizens of Rome had never heard of, a prophet would rise up in the wilderness. It was in the fifteenth year of a new Roman Emperor, Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea (ah, yes, THAT Pontius Pilate!), and Herod Antipas was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip was ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis (east of the Jordan), at the time when Herod had taken his brother Philip's wife Herodias into his house and was sleeping with her (oops - that comes later in the story!), during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas – who would later have Jesus crucified. (See – these names Luke introduced will all be important in the telling of Luke's story.) In those days, Luke writes, *the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it was written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: Prepare ye the way of the Lord!*” To Christians, this prophet named John was the one foretold by the prophet Malachai, in our first lesson, would be God's “*messenger to prepare the way before me.*”

So this “nobody” named John, who preached out in the wilderness beyond the Jordan, up in the north country, several days' journey from Jerusalem, was preaching a message that was bound to bring trouble to the king and the religious authorities living in comfort in the capitol. For he was calling every person of faith to accountability, to repent of their sins, to “turn around” and walk in a different direction according to God's path. And so many would soon come to the wilderness to hear the Baptist preach, and inspired by his message, they would come to be baptized by John themselves in the Jordan River. Baptized for repentance for the forgiveness of their sins, their numbers soon grew, and the authorities sent spies out to see what was happening out there in the wilderness beyond the Jordan! In time the authorities, the high priests in the Temple and King Herod himself would find themselves challenged by the Baptist's words – and it would ultimately cost the Baptist his head! But John prepared the way for Jesus' ministry in Galilee, and his own journey to Jerusalem, where Jesus also challenged the Temple authorities, which threatened them and their tenuous relationship with Rome, so they arranged to have him crucified by Pilate. How is it that such seemingly insignificant, unknown nobodies can cause so much trouble for people in power – who do not have the good of the people in their care in mind!?

So what does this all mean for you and me today? Today you and I live during the presidency of Barack Obama, when Mark Dayton is governor of Minnesota, Pope Francis is the leader of the Roman Catholic Church and Elizabeth Eaton is Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Church in America. We live in a time where life is changing all over the world, and changes come fast in America. It is also a time of anxiety over physical safety, with worries about terrorism in

other countries and an epidemic of gun violence in our own, with rapidly changing demographics and concern about the future. Recent attacks in Paris, shootings in Colorado and San Bernardino, have put everyone “on edge”. It’s a tense time. We look at the array of politicians who seek our vote in coming elections, and wonder who God will send us to be our leaders into that future.

If Luke’s gospel is clear about anything, it is that God chooses those whom the world would most likely ignore to lead God’s people, and to change the world! God called a man named John out in the wilderness to preach a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and prepare the way for the Savior. Then God called a carpenter’s son from Nazareth to bring a message of good news, of the forgiveness and mercy of God, and to die on a cross to take on the sins of the world, and that the whole world would be forgiven. Jesus called his disciples from the least likely of all professions – fishermen and tax collectors – and sent them out to proclaim good news to all people of the saving grace of God! And because of their work, and this message, the world was changed – and is still changing!

So you and I are probably just as insignificant in the larger scheme of things as Jesus, John, and all the disciples were back in those gospel days. Maybe more insignificant! We probably think that there is nothing we can do about what is going on in the world around us, and that we have nothing to offer or a gift that God can use. But perhaps you forget who it is that made you – who is the Creator and who is the creature, who is the Potter and who is the clay? Knowing that God our Father created you and me in all our uniqueness – for a purpose – then we must know that God can use you and me to do great things for the sake of the world!

So the first thing that we take from the scripture lessons today – from Malachai and Luke – is God’s call to repentance. *Metanoia* is the Greek word – it means to “turn yourself around”. To go in another, new direction, and follow God’s path, not our own. We are challenged to listen and hear God’s call – both from scripture and the voices of the people who suffer in our world today, to learn how to listen and be neighbor to the people around us.

This call to repentance: what does it mean for you? What do you know in your heart is something that needs to change in yourself? Only you and God know, so perhaps today is the day for you to pray, listen for God’s voice, and consider what new direction in life God lays out for you.

As a Church and as a people, we also have a calling to repent, to consider our past and present lives, and to seek God’s call to walk in a new direction. Our Lutheran Church is finding that we have too long neglected our neighbors and “stuck with our own” – families, friends, and other Lutherans. It is now time for us to go outside and listen to our neighbors, and also listen to their witness. On this coming Wednesday we are taking a step by inviting our brothers and sisters who are Jews and Muslims to join us and other Christians – to pray together for peace

in a nation and world which has become so violent. It comes in a time in our nation when we are very troubled by the many thousands of deaths by gun violence – over 90,000 since 22 children were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown Connecticut, on December 14, 2012. Each year since, over 11,000 have been killed by homicide, and over 20,000 suicides by guns. So it comes time to not only pray for healing and for peace, and to take steps as a people to make our country a more peaceful place, with less danger from gun violence – *to beat our swords into plowshares, and our spears into pruning hooks, so that nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*

We also live in a time when inequities in education, employment, housing and criminal justice are beyond the point of denial. And they are hurting all of us. We are called by God to hear the cries of our neighbors, and help our state and nation move in another direction. It is time to walk together, listen and help each other thrive in this nation where so much is possible, when we use all of our people's gifts. People of faith – including us in the Church - will have to lead this movement, because at the present time there is so much fear and distrust out there. Just as people of faith helped lead the Civil Rights movement in a previous generation, so we must take leadership now – get past our own fears, and lead.

So the good news is that you and I are called today to repent, turn around, and “*prepare the way of the Lord- with love, make his ways straight – in the ways of justice and peace.*” For when we walk together in faith, following God's call, our Lord will do miracles. And then “*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!*” Amen.