

December 6, 2009

The Second Sunday of Advent, Year C

Luke 3:1-6

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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History is important to the Gospeller Luke. That is nowhere more evident than in this morning's reading. He drops seven names in two verses. Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysaneus, Annas and Caiaphus. Big names. Big guns in their regions.

The men listed here by Luke are powerful men. Emperor, governors, rulers, high priests. These men make the rules. They punish those who break them.

Part of Luke's intent in mentioning these men is to situate the story in a certain time in history. Luke's list could serve to legitimate his retelling. "See, this really did happen, I can name the time and place."

But I think there is more here. I think Luke is naming what our heroes were up against. Shortly before introducing John, Luke lists out some of the most powerful and ruthless people in the region. Luke is showing us how the deck is stacked.

Over here, he is saying, we have seven of the most awe-inducing names in the area. And over here, John. A nobody, born of nobodies, living nowhere. John doesn't stand a chance, Luke is pointing out. Or at least he shouldn't stand a chance.

Oh John. I'll just name it: John is not one of our more likable biblical friends. I always picture John as hygienically challenged, the sort of guy you tolerate because you should, grinning and bearing it. I imagine him ranting and raving, almost-but-not-quite crazy, spitting when he talks. But he's a prophet after all, so we put up with him.

It is this guy, this raving, spitting, smelly weirdo, freshly in from the wilderness, that is about to take on the big guns.

The wilderness is a scary place to be. Remote, likely, and far far away from the ruling government. Far from polite society, in a place where there were no rules of fashion and gastronomy. John lived on the fringes.

Many of you who have read your Bibles might perk up a bit when you hear about "wilderness". A lot happens in the wilderness of the Bible. Wandering, temptation, and, of course, prophecy happens in the wilderness. Gospel writer Luke highlights here that John's situation in the literal and figurative wilderness,

the literal and figurative edges of society, places him as one in a long line of not-quite-crazy biblical prophets. John the prophet is, like his predecessors in that line of work, coming to stir things up, to make people scratch their heads and to make the powers that be really, really angry.

So that's where we begin with John: living in the wilderness, far away from the center, far away from society. A nobody living nowhere.

But here is where the mystery of God takes over yet again: the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. Did you hear that? The word of God came to John. The word of God came to our nobody friend in the middle of his nowhere.

And from there, John went back into society to make that word known to the people. We don't really have any evidence to tell us why John was living out there, but I'm sure it was much more convenient for a nobody prophet to be living away from ridicule. I daresay it was more comfortable for him. Our "wilderness" had become his home. And our home, comfortable, polite society, was John's wilderness.

It is easy to be a crazy prophet out in the wilderness where there is no one to avoid you, make fun of you, persecute you or doubt you. John's challenge was that when the word of God came to him out in the safety of his wilderness, he up and brought that wilderness of faith, that wilderness of God's voice, into the center of society where it was not entirely welcome. Those big guys that we mentioned earlier, they don't like competition.

Any of you that have ever traveled in the developing world know about the wilderness that can come when we are way out of our own element. It can come when a new language is swirling all around you, or when we are forced to live more simply than we prefer. Friends that have spent time in Peace Corps or living abroad in remote areas tell me about the preparation it takes to go there, then the long, steep learning curve of living in such a place. But over time, the things once perceived as challenges are eventually accepted as part of a new lifestyle. Habits and rhythms adapt.

And then, as difficult as going out into the wilderness can be, reentry can be worse. Like coming into harsh sunlight after a long sit in a dark theater, entering back into society where there is a gadget for everything and luxuries like clean water are taken for granted can be disorienting and painful. Coming down off the mountain is difficult.

But experiences like that change us. After traveling in Burma and being received by some of the most gracious people I have ever met, I have a profound respect for the place of meat in the human diet and its egregious overconsumption in the United States. I also know more about being a gracious host, and how attentiveness and a good pot of tea can outshine a lavishly prepared meal. I

learned how to give a meaningful gift when economic resources are scarce. I don't know if God's voice spoke to me in that wilderness, but I know I came back changed and I wanted to talk about it to everyone.

But those lessons we learn in hardship are hard to retain when we are back in comfortable world. After we recover from our shock and get settled again in our soft beds with our coffee makers and flushing toilets, those lessons can fade. We lose our edge when we cease to hear the voice that came to us in the wilderness. We can't feel the lessons as well when we are home from the wilderness, distracted by that which is plush and easy.

John had been living out in the wilderness long enough to develop a taste for bugs. Surely that had to have been a long long time (gah!). But the word of God came to visit him there. The word of God CAME TO HIM, right where he was. And when it did, like any good prophet, John had to leave what he had grown accustomed to, his comfortable wilderness, and go back into that which was a real wilderness for him: the society of those heads of state and leaders of religion. The place where his brand of prophecy was not looked kindly upon. A place where camel's hair was entirely out of fashion.

And to add injury to insult, not only did John enter into this uncomfortable place, but he bore a difficult message: God is coming. Get ready. Change the landscape, change your lives. The world as we know it is shifting.

John the Baptist preached forgiveness of sins and the baptism of repentance, undermining the authority of the religious establishment. John made himself less and less popular every time he opened his mouth.

But that was John's call. The voice of God came to John in the wilderness, unbidden. When you are visited by the voice of God, you listen. You go. You preach.

The challenge to us inherent in John the Baptist's actions is to examine our lives and cultivate practices that make us ready for the voice of God. We don't have to live out in the literal jungle wilderness all the time to live in a way that reminds us daily, hourly even, that the center of our lives is Jesus, the Christ. We would do just fine to name our own wilderness, to understand that the cacophony of sounds, images and experiences that vie for our attention is wilderness enough to distract us from the message of Christ.

But we don't always remember. We don't always recognize that we're in a wilderness, far from God, far from that which is worthy of our love and attention.

We need the spitting, honking voice of John the Baptist to remind us of our mission in the world. The modern world and a gospel-centered life are not mutually exclusive. The voice of John crying "make way! Make way!" reminds us that we can-- indeed must—live in a way that points always and only to God,

not to the world around us. And when we figure out how to do that, we much speak that message aloud to a world that could use some hope and a way out of meaninglessness.

God takes us to uncomfortable places. We aren't expected to stay there forever, but we are expected to grow from the experience, to learn something that we can take with us into the larger world, back into comfortable polite society, to stir things up, to make others just a little uncomfortable, too, so that the messages spreads and the world changes. We are called to change the world with our words, God's words really, words that will find us in the wilderness then drive us out into places that need to hear them. We may occasionally be seen as stinky, spitting n'er-do-wells, but that is the mark of a good prophet. Truth isn't always popular, it isn't always comfortable, but, again, it is world-changing.

Prepare ye the way, my friends, prepare ye the way.