

The Word of God Came to John and Comes to Us

December 6, 2015 – Advent 2C  
First Lutheran Church, St. Peter, MN  
Text: Luke 1:68-79, Luke 3:1-6

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our coming Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tiberius Caesar. Pontius Pilate. Herod Antipas. For the original audience of Luke's gospel, these names would have required no introduction. These were some of the most important people in Palestine around 30 CE. Men who had great power and wealth and stature. They are so important that Luke names them to provide the setting and context of this reading because everyone knows who they are. But following this listing of "who's who" in Palestine, we hear, "the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness." Really? John? John, the guy who Matthew's gospel tells us wore camel's hair and ate locusts. John, the guy who spends his time wandering in the desert. John, the guy who goes around telling people to repent. John, a nobody. The word of God comes to John. Here's what this may look like if Luke were writing today. In the seventh year of the presidency of Barack Obama, when Mark Dayton was governor of Minnesota, the word of God came to John, that rough looking guy standing on the street corner who is holding a cardboard sign that says "repent."

Makes you wonder. Makes me wonder, at least. Why on earth did God choose John? Why did the word of God come to John, of all people? Surely there are better candidates. Luke just listed a bunch of them! Emperors, kings, governors, high priests. People who are educated, well-spoken, and influential. People who are at the top. Compared to that august list, John had zero qualifications. Surely if God had chosen one of those other people, God's message would be more widely heard and better accepted.

And yet, the word of God came to John. The nobody guy eating locusts in the desert. Throughout the Bible, God has a tendency to do this – to choose people who may not seem the obvious choice. Joseph the forgotten prisoner. Moses the fugitive murderer. Rahab the foreign prostitute. Ruth the outcast widow. David the youngest son of a shepherd. Amos the sheep herder and fig farmer. Mary the unwed teenage mother. When you look at these people, none of them seem like the best candidates to be God’s chosen agent in the world. They all would likely have been considered nobodies, or worse. And yet, God came to each of them and worked through them. God made them into rulers, liberators, saviors, prophets, kings, and the very Mother of God. God could have chosen better qualified or experienced servants, but God chose these people: the lowly, the outcast, the humble. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low.” Or in the words of Mary earlier in Luke, “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.” God works by reversing the orders we humans seem to cling to and rejecting the statuses we crave. Rather than abide by the societal structures we create, God raises up those whom society has placed low and makes them great. Time after time we witness God work through those who one would not expect to see as leaders – the ordinary people – the nobodies of the world.

Last winter, I had the opportunity to take a 3-week January term seminary class at Holden Village. For those of you who may not be familiar with Holden, it is a Lutheran community at the site of an old mining village and nestled in the middle of the Railroad Creek Valley of the Cascade Mountains in Washington state. To get there, you have to get to the small town of Chelan, take a 3-hour long ferry ride up the state’s largest lake, and then load onto an old school bus for another hour drive up the valley. Cell phones don’t work there. You’re without internet

access. It's one of the most remote inhabited places in the contiguous United States. For three weeks, we were all but cut off from the world and living in the wilderness – quite literally the wilderness, too, as we were on the edge of the Glacier Peak Wilderness area. One of the elements of our class was that we kept the daily prayer offices. Based on ancient monastic rituals, the daily office is a series of prayers timed to the rhythms of the day. The three principle offices, which are retained in our hymnal, are Matins in the morning, Vespers in the evening, and Compline at night.

Early in our time in Holden, I was leading our morning prayer service and decided that we should go stand by the creek outside. Traditionally, one does not speak before Matins, so we walked outside into the snow and the pre-dawn darkness in silence. When we reached the rippling waters of the creek, we began our prayer service. By the time we got to the Gospel Canticle, the same canticle we sang this morning for our psalmody, dawn was imminent. And then it happened. As we sang “In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us,” the sun finally crept over the mountaintops and magnificently shone on the valley. It was one of the most amazing experiences I've ever had and I think of it every time I sing that song. It felt like the word of God was coming anew upon our small group standing there at the edge of the wilderness.

According to Luke's gospel, this was the song that Zechariah sang after the birth of his son, John. It's a song of praise and thanksgiving as well as prophesy and promise. It recognizes God's long history of faithfulness and salvation for Israel and anticipates the imminent Messiah and John's role in preparation for his coming.

The second half of the canticle moves from Zechariah's praise of God to his blessing of his newborn son. But, in some ways, this blessing is for all of us, which is why we sing it during

morning prayer. “And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you go before the Lord to prepare the way, to give God’s people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.” You, child. Not just the mighty, not just the rulers, not just the pastors, you. Not necessarily the best educated or the most articulate, but you. Through the waters of our Baptism, God has claimed us and made prophets and priests in Christ Jesus. Through that claim we are called “to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed.” Beloved siblings in Christ, each of us, ordinary people though we may be, have been made instruments of God’s work in the world. Even when we are in the wildernesses of our lives, God’s word comes to us. Even when we feel like nobodies, like God should use someone else, someone more qualified or able, God tells us, “I have called you, my child, to be my messenger to my people.” By proclaiming the good news of God’s love for all people, by working towards peace and justice in the earth, and by serving each other in love, we join in John’s work of preparing the way for Christ Jesus who has come, who is here, and who will come again.

Long ago, the word of God came to John in the wilderness, but now the word of God comes again to each of us and calls us to prepare the way of the coming dawn from on high that will break upon us.