

A Time for Prophets
Luke 3:1-6, 10-22
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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Emperor Tiberius—all...Pontius Pilate—Judea...Herod—Galilee...
Philip—Ituraea and Trachonitis...Lysanias—Abilene...
Annas and Caiaphas—Temple

But the word of God? Comes to John, son of Zechariah
in the wilderness.

Do you know who is in charge? This week, some pundits criticized the governor of Florida because after the tragedy at the Fort Lauderdale Airport, he didn't call the President, he called the President-elect, I daresay because in his mind, he's already the one with the power and position.

You may remember that Luke began with a similar announcement of the rulers of the day and then told the story of the coming of a new king in a stable in Bethlehem. Ha, ha, big kings. Meet God's king who is not what you are expecting.

Now, we get another litany of the people who are supposed to be in charge. We can practically see their images splayed across billboards and Twitter accounts: Tiberius all the way down to the Roman appointed high priests in the Jerusalem temple, Annas and Caiaphas. These are the people we think are in charge even of God, but God picks up the Word phone and calls the locust-eater in the wilderness instead.

It is a time of unrest, a time when rulers appear to be capricious and the threat of violence always hangs in the air. Scholar Richard Benke says in that context, "the names provide insight into the forces affecting the Jewish nation and calling for the ministry that John was appointed by God to supply. Roman rule was always a heavy yoke for the Jews. The reign of Tiberius was known for its severity and cruelty. After 15 years, that style of rule had easily found its way into Palestine. The four area leaders implemented Roman policy and maintained their positions by keeping Rome happy. The weakness of religious leadership is indicated by the mention of the two men as high priests. While a high priest

normally served for life, Rome was able to name a new high priest whenever it served Roman interest.”¹

Welcome to Jesus’ public ministry in Luke, where the folks who are supposed to be in power come under the withering presences of two very different prophets. The first is a prophet the people can recognize. John the Baptizer is a prophet cut from the cloth of the Old Testament. He is a man of the wilderness, one who is called apart. Like Elijah the greatest prophet of the Old Testament, John is an outsider who comments from the fringe of society because he chooses not to find his way to the center. He stands from his place outside of the city, on the edge of the river, and calls out the sins and wrongs of the day. He calls the people to a kind of baptism very different than the one we just remembered. For John, baptism is only about the personal decision to “repent.” The word in Greek means to turn one’s head around and to be forgiven — a word in the Greek that is taken from the root of the word to let go. John’s Baptism is about a decision to try to change. It is a baptism that might conceivably need to be repeated many times if efforts to turn and let go of the past fail.

I think the world still needs prophets like John the Baptist — those in service to a truth they have come to understand, those who are outside of the corrupt systems of the world who invite us to see the world and our place in it as it really is, and those who turn our heads around and invite us to let go of whatever it is that is keeping us a slave to the worst parts of ourselves and our world.

But today is about the announcement of a new prophet. John is not the Messiah, though he looks like the kind they are expecting — a rabble rouser who could gather an army of supporters and try to crush the oppressive, sinful forces of the day, even as he calls his people to moral purity and strength in self-denial.

But Luke is at pains to remind us that John is not the Messiah. So he has John describe that messiah and then tells us that John has actually already baptized him and didn’t know it.

That’s one of the unique aspects of Jesus’ baptism as remembered by the tradition of Luke. John speaks of the Messiah here in the abstract, not in reference to Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary. No, here, Jesus’ baptism is two sentences at the end of the introduction to John. He is just one more of the crowd who is baptized. Oh, sure, he gets the spirit descending like a dove just

¹ Richard Benke. *Concordia Journal* “Second Sunday in Advent, Luke 3:1-6, December 8, 1985.” 11 no 6 N 1985, p 224.

like in all the other gospels' versions of the baptism, but did you notice? The heavenly voice says, "You are my son, the beloved, in you I am well pleased." As far as we know, only Jesus is witness to this divine greeting and blessing. Otherwise he is just one more from among the people.

And perhaps that is the most important thing that is announced in today's text, the most important thing about this prophet. Jesus will not be a prophet who stays in the wilderness. He will be a prophet and teacher among the people. He will not stand on the fringes and lob his prophetic zingers at the powers that be. He will GO to the fringes to be with the people whom the close-minded religious folks have excluded. And he will go into the homes and synagogues of those very powerful and influential people and SHOW them a new prophetic way.

Oh, sure, Jesus will challenge the powers. Jesus will be arrested like John and killed much more publicly than John. But his prophetic ministry will be different. The baptism he proclaims will be different. It will be once and for all, for this prophet will take the wrongs of the world upon himself and, ultimately, show that grace, love and life are triumphant over fear, hatred and death — not by his words alone but by his life and ministry and resurrection.

John the Baptist's message was revolutionary, but it was not new. Jesus' message and ministry were new because they were born not simply out of critique of the system and of individual sin, but because they created a new community. Jesus didn't just call people to turn their heads around and let go of the past, though he certainly did that. He issued those calls in the midst of demonstrating his desire to unite, to welcome, to create a new way of living that wasn't about me and God, but about us and God — about how the destructive systems and behaviors in the world weren't just about our lack of piety, but were actually the source of suffering for God's children and for God because they were the source of Her children's suffering.

Oddly enough, Rabbi Michael Adam Latz of the Air Tikvah Synagogue in the Twin Cities seems to have captured the spirit of Jesus' kind of prophecy in a message he gave this week calling for "a theological revolution in America."

He said, "It is time for a theological revolution in America: Where we wake up to the suffering around us and strive, together, to find ways to build a community and society with compassion as the cornerstone of our social policy and human dignity and mutual respect at the heart of our politics. Where people of faith proclaim that racism and sexism and the worship of guns and addressing mass violence and the need for decent public education and quality affordable health care and work that pays a sustainable and thriving wage are not merely

rights in a civilized society; they are moral commitments we must make to one another and the next generation. It is time for a theological revolution in America where we are willing to listen to people who disagree with us because we hold their humanity and our collective future in our hearts and our hands and because to be a person of faith means that hope is a commitment we make to ourselves and our children.”

Rabbi Latz doesn't proclaim that message from outside, as a John-like social critic, but from the heart of suburban struggle, from a neighborhood not unlike our own. His frame of reference may be slightly different than ours, but one senses that Rabbi Yeshua from Galilee would find common ground with his prophetic call.

Today, for the first time this year, we come to that Yeshua's table again, the table which is the ultimate manifestation of the new world that this new Prophet, this Emmanuel, God-with-us prophet, Jesus sets before us.

We aren't the only ones who are invited to this table. Jesus says, come to this table and remember me. Remembering — it's a great word isn't it? Some have suggested it is the opposite of dismembering, the tearing of something apart. In remembering, we put back together that which was. Do this, remembering me, putting back together this prophetic ministry that practiced radical hospitality, that used its winnowing fork not to say that this person is wheat and this person is chaff, but that each of us has chaff that needs to be broken away, burned away to reveal our truest selves, the wheat from which God is feeding the world with compassion, generosity, grace and justice.

We come to the font to remember that we have been invited into a royal priesthood of the forgiven, the free, who are claimed by God in love, for love. And we come to the table to remember that in that freedom of being God's beloved, we have no choice but to respond. At the table we encounter all those who have been invited before us, friend and enemy, traitor and heroine, bully and brother. And at this prophetic table of radical hospitality we are fed spiritually for the prophetic work that lies before us.

Heaven knows, this is a time when prophets are needed in our community, our state, our nation and our world. I suppose the choice is ours, to choose the path of our brother John or of our Messiah Christ. Both are, in different ways, prophetic paths. But perhaps it's worth noting that the prophet John changed lives, no doubt about it. But the prophet, priest, king Jesus changed the world. And is still changing the world, right here — in you, in me and in us. Thanks be to God. Amen.