

For Yonder Breaks
Luke 3:1-6
Northminster Presbyterian Church
December 6, 2015

We set out today on a two week journey through the life and ministry of John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus. Like me, you might be asking why? We've got to get ready for the baby after all...and I don't know about you...but with everything going on in the world, I'm already good and ready for stars and shepherds, for near-term Mary headed to the census in that little backwater town of Bethlehem, for that comfortable old story of the birth in a stable that makes me feel warm and cozy and peaceful...that makes me feel good. The last thing I want is some lunatic from the desert screaming at me about what I need to repent of and Luke showing off about his knowledge of the Old Testament by quoting—incorrectly, mind you, and out of context—from Isaiah 40.

I guess if I'm honest, given how painfully human the news seems to be lately, what I want most right now is Angels...Angels visiting Mary with a promise so unbelievable and so marvelous that she can't help but believe...Angels talking to Joseph and keeping him from making Mary just another unwed mother, fallen woman and outcast...I want angels talking to shepherds ...Angels singing with the Hosts of heaven...angels like in the Children's Bible I grew up with—who hover around the Christ child...forget this crazy guy in the desert, God, bring us some angels...Instead what do we get this week? The smelly prophet in goat skin...

Swell...another whiny pietistic locust-eater who makes us feel inadequate, who perhaps rightly reminds us that we are not doing what we should do...that we need to straighten up and fly right...Please God...not another prophet...

And what a prophet Luke makes him out to be... like the renowned judge and prophet Samuel from the Old Testament. His birth is a gift from God to a faithful, barren woman...like many of the great prophets of Judah and Israel, the story of his ministry is introduced with a list of the leaders of the day...Why, according to Luke, he's even the prophet that Isaiah was talking about hundreds of years back, when the Israelites were slaves in

Babylon...way back in the 40th chapter of the prophetic writings we collect under Isaiah's name.

Given all these allusions to the big time prophets of old, at the end of today's passage one is tempted to turn to Luke and say, "Okay, okay, he's special we get it...lay off." And we are also tempted to say, "Thanks for the history lesson about Jesus' cousin, but so what?"

Is that what today's passage is all about, just identifying John as an important prophet? Big deal. If that's all this is about, couldn't that have been handled in a couple of minutes, couldn't we have tacked this passage onto the rest of the story of John's ministry which comes along next week? I mean why stop here, before we've actually heard John say a word? It's like we get the teaser, but the real show is delayed until next week...

What's so important about this introduction that merits its own sermon? After all, it appears to be just a litany of political leaders followed by the briefest of summaries of John's ministry, coupled with some lines from Isaiah.

First let's consider that list of names. Listen to the passage again: 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 Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Wait a minute...well what do you know...Within the sweeping context of world history, the word of God comes to a certain man who is in the wilderness, far removed from the central happenings of the day. See how the text moves intentionally from the emperor... the self-proclaimed God of the Roman empire, to the governor of Judea, to the vassal king of Galilee, to the regional authorities, to the high priests and finally to the bottom of the political pecking order, to perhaps the last man who might be considered in line for power—an insignificant man named John who sits not on a throne in a palace, but on a rock in the wilderness. And to whom does the word of

God come? Not to any of those powerful figures sitting in their throne rooms or behind their desks of power....No the text passes all of them by, instead...the Word of God comes to this obscure nobody, a preacher's kid, hanging out on the edge of society.

I'm betting that juxtaposition isn't for nothing...for I think it says a little more about John's call for repentance... like for instance... as he travels around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance...just who do we think he is calling to repent? Sure many people from all walks of life hear his call and respond...but are they John's chief intended audience?...We'll get some clue next week when Herod the king sets out to destroy John after he gets more specific about some shenanigans in the royal household...Perhaps we hear this litany of political and religious leaders because they are the ones the prophet speaks to most fervently...And in that sense, John joins almost every prophet of the Old Testament, speaking words of correction and renewal to the leaders of the day...to the powerful...to the ones who sit in the seats of power...and calling them to repent...literally to have a change of mind.

And surely a change of mind is needed in our discourse today...isn't it? Every side points fingers at every other side...it seems if one group can't win they make it their goal to prevent all other sides from winning---it's a model that is at work today in Syria, in Washington, in Springfield, in Chicagoland...What if the call to repent...to a change of mind is for all...most importantly to repent of our feelings about one another...

And what about that Isaiah text that is almost but not quite a quote from Isaiah 40? What's it here for? Most scholars agree that chapter 40 of Isaiah is the beginning of one of the most hope-filled prophetic messages in all of scripture...The time was a few generations after the elite in the fallen kingdom of Judah had been taken into exile in Babylon and the time for their return was at hand...They were afraid...after all, all they had known was the life of the displaced person...the forced refugee...all they could see was a long, dangerous trek across hundreds of miles of mountains and strange desert to an uncertain future...The prophet seems to look out over the dangerous and treacherous terrain that lies between exile and home and speaks a word of promise that the God who travels with them is too great to

be overcome by mountains, too vast to be trapped in the deep valleys, too determined and true to be lost in the twisting turns of the life ahead... And so to the women and men who first heard these words...the prophet is a messenger of hope for a peaceful return home.

Perhaps Luke wants to remind his readers that the heart of every prophetic message is a word of hope...not just the pitfalls of the current path, but the promise of another way....the peace that is possible if we choose God's way....

Perhaps we are to remember that the one who is coming is the one who can bring us home again as well...to our truest selves...to the hopeful, loving, peaceful people we are called to be.

Regardless, it is as if Luke wants to remind us what prophecy is for...not to predict the doom of the future or even really to wag a finger at the powerful and those who misbehave, but rather to encourage the change of heart and mind **and action** that sets one on a path that has more promise than we can ever imagine.

Fifty-one years ago this week, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King accepted the Nobel Peace Prize. On that December morning he said, "I accept this award today with... an audacious faith in the future of humankind. I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the "isness" of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal "oughtness" that forever confronts him. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land. This faith can give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hoovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights,

we will know that we are living in the creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born.”

Perhaps that is what is coming...in the midst of these storm-tossed days of violence and retribution...we are reminded that the call to repentance is ultimately a call toward a hopeful, peaceful future...the promise of the Way of God...

So what do we do with all of this...we people who seek to prepare the Way of the Lord...here In the 7th year of the term of President Obama, when Bruce Rauner is Governor of Illinois, when Toni Preckwinkle is leader of Cook County, when Elizabeth Tisdahl is Mayor of Evanston, when Mark Tendam is the ruler of Ward 6... during the pastorates of Jessica and Michael?

Perhaps first we are challenged and emboldened to self-examination for those places where we still live in shadow...to choose the path of peace in repentance...and claim the freedom of forgiveness. But perhaps we are also called to challenge those in power in the church, the culture, and the world of political and economic and social might to repent...inviting our collective culture to have a change of heart, mind AND ACTION. To look at the causes of violence...to look at the ease of access to tools of death...to look at the social and political structures that so disenfranchise our brothers and sisters here and around the world that they are drawn to destructive and murderous paths...And then to seek a new way...but not to do it by wagging fingers at those who have strayed, but by pointing the way—in our words but more importantly in our living and how we treat others. In other words, to be messengers of the way of Peace, Hope, Compassion and, yes, even Joy that is the way of the child who comes...the Christ who is coming again.

Oh yeah...and about that idea of wanting Angels today...In Jesus time...the word for messenger was *Angelion*...the word we translate sometimes as Angel. And so fellow would-be angels... let us with courage and joy journey together through the current midnights and the lingering shadows...in hope and peace...for yonder breaks a new a glorious morn...Amen.