

December 6, 2015 Communion - Advent 2

The readings from Luke this morning are all a part of the birth narrative of John the Baptist. As was customary all of the neighbors and family joined in the celebration of the birth and the naming of the child. The naming generally took place in the temple when the child was welcomed into the community of God. Often the child was named after the father, but the name of John was understood to be a prophetic revelation to Elizabeth from God. The first part of the reading is prophecy of Zechariah and speaks to the hope of the Jewish people that will be fulfilled. The second part of the reading is a summary of the life and work of John the Baptist, as John comes to demand repentance.

Luke 1: 68-79

⁶⁸Blessed be the Lord, the **God of Israel**; he came and set his people free.

⁶⁹He set the power of salvation in the center of our lives, and in the very house of David his servant,

⁷⁰Just as he promised long ago through the preaching of his holy prophets:

⁷¹**Deliverance from our enemies and every hateful hand;**

⁷²Mercy to our fathers, as he remembers to do what he said he'd do,

⁷³What he swore to our father **Abraham**—⁷⁴a clean rescue from the enemy camp,

So we can worship him without a care in the world, ⁷⁵made holy before him as long as we live.

⁷⁶And you, my child, "Prophet of the Highest," will go ahead of the Master to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷Present the offer of salvation to his people, the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸Through the heartfelt mercies of our God, God's Sunrise will break in upon us,

⁷⁹Shining on those in the darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death,

Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace.

Luke 3: 1-6

¹In the fifteenth year of the rule of **Caesar Tiberius**—it was while **Pontius Pilate** was governor of Judea; **Herod**, ruler of Galilee; his brother **Philip**, ruler of Iturea and Trachonitis; **Lysanias**, ruler of Abilene; ²during the Chief-Priesthood of **Annas** and **Caiaphas**—**John**, **Zachariah's** son, out in the desert at the time, received a message from God. ³He went all through the country around the **Jordan River** preaching a baptism of life-change leading to forgiveness of sins, ⁴as described in the words of Isaiah the prophet:

Thunder in the desert!

"Prepare God's arrival!

Make the road smooth and straight!

⁵Every ditch will be filled in,

Every bump smoothed out,

The detours straightened out,
All the ruts paved over.
⁶Everyone will be there to see
The parade of God's salvation."

Sermon

This week we have another scripture passage from Luke and like last week's we can wonder what all of this has to do with Advent, but let's go back a couple of weeks. As I stated on Reign of Christ Sunday, Sharon spoke about the coming of a new kingdom of God and last week I spoke about the second coming of Jesus and the promise that was given to us in this. I have been thinking about that this past week and I have realized what a huge promise that is, God coming again into the world. And so where to find ourselves this week?

At the end of today's reading from Luke we have the prophecy from Isaiah 40, where Isaiah foretells the coming of God, and as the choir will sing we are called to make straight a highway in the desert, the valleys will be lifted up, and the mountains made low. This is quite the prophecy and in some ways echoes what we spoke of last week, in those words of apocalypse. Yet what does this mean to us, what are we waiting for and how are we to wait?

Throughout Advent we have placing names on the timeline and if you noticed your bulletin cover this week there is now a family tree on it with David's name added to this tree. We are working towards placing Jesus in a specific family tree and therefore in a specific context, in the hopes that we might better come to understand what is happening.

This is what Luke has done in this morning's Gospel reading, he has placed events squarely in their historical context. This makes a great deal of sense when one considers that Luke appears to be quite the historian, Todd Weir, who is the senior pastor at First Churches in Northampton, Mass, describes Luke in the following way, "**Luke is an educated man, a physician, who wrote beautiful Greek and probably encountered the best of the Stoics, Aristotle and so on.**"

And so it would make sense, that for Luke, understanding some of the facts around what was going on would be important.

And so what was going on in the world during that time?

¹In the fifteenth year of the rule of Caesar Tiberius—it was while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod, ruler of Galilee; his brother Philip, ruler of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias, ruler of Abilene; ²during the Chief-Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.

But let's see what happens if we change this to our current context, well actually to a context a couple of years back. This is exactly what Weir did as he wrote a modern version of Luke's proclamation; **"It was the year 2010, during the Presidency of Benjamin Netanyahu, when the Ultra Orthodox controlled the Knesset in Israel, and Bashar Assad ruled in Syria; the King Faisal controlled the house of Saud, Hamas had power in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt; Mohammar Khadafi ruled in Libya. And the Great Powers; Vladimir Putin of Russia and Barack Obama; like a series of United States Presidents, supplied them all with foreign aid and weapons."**

This sounds very much like the political and institutional structure that was in place during the time of Luke's reading.

Pop culture reference time. So I will admit that as a child I did not really get into comic books, except for the odd Archie comic. But I will say that I have been a huge fan of the movies that have come out in the last couple of years that have been a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This has included the Iron Man movies, the Thor movies, the Avenger movies, and the Captain America movies. But I was really confused when I heard they were releasing a movie called Ant Man. In this movie a down-on-his-luck young man is recruited to work for a scientist who has developed technology that allows one to shrink to the size of an ant and even better yet, to control actual ants as well. Of course you have the bad guy, from which Ant Man must steal some important technology before it gets sold to the highest bidder and makes the world a much more dangerous place. As with most of these movies the good guys win and they set the scene for a sequel. Now the rest of my family knew all about Ant Man, but I was so confused. Really a hero, whose power was to shrink down to the size of an ant! That to me made no sense, that was until I saw the movie. It seems that sometimes it is the smallest of things that can cause the biggest of changes. Look at the damage that termites can do to what we as humans can build. The smallest of things can change great things.

This is what I think Luke was getting at in placing the Gospel lesson in the context of the powers of the day. Luke was saying that in the midst of all of this power, in the midst of all of this empire, the births of two small babies will change the world. Two of the smallest, helpless things that can change the world.

Last week we were told of this great big promise, the promise of God coming again into the world. And that we are called to be that promise in the world today, yet that is a huge promise and so does that mean that we are called to big

things in the world. Well we might just be called to those huge actions that can change the world.

But then again maybe we are also called to understand that God works in those who might seem small and insignificant, the birth of a tiny baby, a young person who is standing up for that other bullied young person, the one who open the door for another, or the one who gives to that homeless person begging on the street corner. What we are told today in our scripture from Luke is a promise that might be too small that we might miss it. The promise that even the smallest of things can change the world. And so although we are called to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world we need to know that even the smallest of acts can change the world. God does not only work through those in power, God works through the smallest and least of us.

Even the smallest of acts can work to make straight those highways in the desert and lift up the valleys because even the smallest of acts can prepare the way for the Lord as we become more Christ-like. We always see Advent as that time when we prepare for Christmas and what are we really doing, we are really preparing the way for God and as we begin to see that even small acts of kindness, love, compassion, and justice can begin to dismantle those structures of empire in society we truly do begin to prepare the world to be more as God desires.

In the movie Ant Man the smallest of things, a person who became the size of an ant, and actually even smaller, became that which saved. Sometimes we are called to small acts and in these acts we need to know that God is working through us and that this can change the world for someone and maybe even for all of us. Amen.