

ADVENT TWO, YEAR C, DECEMBER 8, 2024

The opening lines of this morning's gospel reads like a who's who of 1st century political figures: Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, and High Priests Annas and Caiaphas. Powerful leaders in their time that wielded a lot of power and control over the people. It's interesting that Luke would include all these leaders as he introduces John the Baptist and it makes you wonder why?

First of all Luke wants us to understand that God is doing something new. He's telling us that the word of God does not come to Tiberius or to Pontius Pilate or Herod in their palaces. He's also telling us the word of God does not come to Annas or Caiaphas in the temple. In fact Luke is emphatic that the word of God does not come to the great, to those at the top or to the most powerful. Rather, Luke tells us the word of God comes to a nobody, an unknown, an unimportant, aesthetic named John who lives in the desert. And John was a nobody by the world's standards—a man without wealth, power, or status. He didn't have a fancy title, college degrees, or a seat in the boardroom. God chose John—the humble son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a man who made his career in the wilderness.

And so God chooses to show up to regular people like John, and perhaps to regular people like us. Bottom line Luke wants us to know emphatically that the important people are not really as important as they think they are and that the old power structures are coming to an end. He's telling us a new kingdom is dawning and it's a kingdom not located in Rome or Jerusalem, but a kingdom that will be centered on a crib, in a stable in Bethlehem.

Second, by naming all these political figures, Luke wants us to understand that the story he's getting ready to tell us, the story of John and then the story of Jesus, the story of God becoming one of us is not a once upon a time story. Rather this remarkable story is anchored in the concrete, tangible history of the world. Christianity is very much a religion within history. It is not a story that is separate from human history, but a story that happened at a very particular time and in a very particular place.

The question we need to ask is if John's message has any relevance to us today. His message appears to be harsh. John seems to be telling us that God's divine love is dependent upon our repentance. With that kind of understanding it seems that God's love comes with strings attached. It's as if John is telling us that if we get our acts together, if we get our lives straightened out, if we own up to our sins and stop committing them, then, then we can receive the Christ child when he comes. Is that his message?

I don't think that's John's message at all. In fact the kind of God we believe in makes a huge difference in how we live our lives. As author and Benedictine sister, Joan Chittister, once wrote, "Until I discover the God in which I believe, I will never understand another thing about my own life. If my God is a harsh judge, I will live in unquenchable guilt. If my God is holy nothingness, I will live a life of cosmic loneliness. If my God is a taunt and a bully, I will live my life impaled on the pin of a grinning giant. If my God is life and hope, I will live my life in fullness and overflowing forever."

We are made in the image of God, yet we grow in the image of God we make for ourselves. John arrives today in the midst of our Christmas preparations and tells us to repent. But the Savior he proclaims and the love our Savior brings is not contingent

upon that repentance. Love has nothing to do with pardon and forgiveness. The love that is born into the world in that stable in Bethlehem is here for us in spite of our shortcomings, in spite of our brokenness, in spite of our failings. It is free and unearned and unasked for. It is in fact, the greatest gift we will ever receive. The truth is, John tells us to repent not so we can be deserving of God's love, but John tells us to repent to open us up, to make us take a fresh look at ourselves and our lives. To wake us up and prepare us for this new thing that happened when Tiberius and Trachonitis and Lysanias were in power. This new thing is still happening. The truth is, John tells us to repent because the Savior is coming and Jesus needs us. There is so much that needs to be done.

As David Leininger writes, "There are mountains that need to come down, mountains of racism and sexism and ageism in any other ism that blocks our way to healthy relationships...There are valleys to be filled, valleys of depression and despair, loneliness, grief, and pain, any of which can keep us from rich relationships... There are crooked places to be made straight even among those we might never imagine; fine exteriors that mask rotten interiors of abuse or neglect or violence.... There are rough places to be made smooth, rough places that have come because of oppression or injustice."

So, even in the middle of the hustle and bustle, we are invited by John not only to prepare for the celebration of Christmas but also to prepare for the coming of God to us. When we slow our pace a bit, refocus ourselves, and open ourselves to the movement of God, we prepare the way of the Lord. We prepare the way of the Lord when we take time away to worship together. We prepare the way when we participate in acts of justice and service to one another and to our community. We prepare the way when we seek to right the wrongs done to the downtrodden and oppressed in our nation and world. We prepare the way when we clean up and re-pave the road for people to more fully experience God's love and presence. And we prepare the way when we remind one another that God is on the way and, indeed, already moving in, with, and among us.

Today as we baptize Paige we are telling her that she is not only a child of God but that she is brought into an intimate relationship with a loving God. We are all God's beloved children which means we are to love as God loves and to see each other that way. We are also here to prepare Paige to make her way in the world where she too can be a shining light for those who cross her path. May she be filled with God's love that she too will join in the work of participating in acts of justice, love and compassion for there is no greater work for us to be about.

My friends, there's work to do. As we make our way on this four week journey to Bethlehem, are we ready to welcome the God of love who breaks into human history? Are we ready for this new kingdom that He brings with him, this new way of being in the world where the first are last and the last are first? This new way of relating to the God who loves us unconditionally? Christ is coming, as Zechariah reminds us today, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and to guide our feet into the way of peace. Christ is coming and the old is passing away. Are we ready? Christ is coming. And He needs us. There is work to be done. Amen.