

2 Advent – Year C – December 6, 2009
Baruch 5:1-9; Canticle 16 (Luke 1:68-79); Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6
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The invading Roman army originally built the great north road leading in an uncannily straight northerly direction from London, England. Long after the Roman army withdrew to Europe, the road remained. Later it was widened and repaved, then renamed the A1, becoming one of Britain's first major highways. There are Roman roads and settlements all over England. Many are now buried beneath highways or farmlands, but some are still visible or protected as historical sites. Having figured out that the most direct way between two points is a straight line, the Roman army unerringly built their roads with great precision, up, down and along, but always dead straight. The engineering and construction is very impressive. Suffice as to say, they were built with great care, and built to last, remaining part of history, long after the empire crumbled.

There is a slice of history recorded for us in today's Gospel lesson from Luke as well. Luke firmly plants the first advent of Jesus Christ into an historical context. The Roman Emperor was Tiberius, Pontius Pilate his governor of Judea, and Herod the puppet ruler of Galilee. Annas and Caiaphas are named as high priests, which is interesting because there is only one high priest of the Temple at Jerusalem at any given time. In fact, Caiaphas is either Annas' son-in-law or grandson. The point being made by Luke here is to show the extensive influence of Annas on the succession of high priests that followed him in leading the Judean people, and opposing Jesus' ministry. All of the rulers named have substantial power in the world, and will have some role to play later in Luke's gospel account in the growing tension between human will and divine revelation. There is no escaping Luke's distinct way of weaving the social and political implications of the world's history with God's eternal response, deliverance, and redemption.

In contrast to these high-powered political figures is the prophet John, son of Zechariah. His story began earlier in Luke. Our gospel writer wants to make sure that we have not forgotten God's intervention in bringing about John's birth, as well as Zechariah's prophecy about his newborn son. That is the prophecy we heard in this morning's canticle. Not only has Zechariah told us that his son would be a prophet, but Luke now tells us "the word of God came to John". This is the classic formulation in the Hebrew Scriptures of how God speaks to His prophets, including John, the New Testament prophet. As we saw last week, we have to put the characters into context in their own history as well as on the mighty stage of God's work in salvation history. To that end, John comes from the wilderness bearing God's prophetic message to the region around the river Jordan. Both of these references – wilderness and the River Jordan – are like symbolic alarm bells jingling and jangling with hugely significant undertones and overtones. The wilderness is synonymous with the great exodus story, when at God's command; Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt into freedom, so that they might worship God. After many years of wandering in the desert and learning a lot about their dependence on God, they crossed the River Jordan into the Promised Land. The exodus story is also your story and mine. Every baptized Christian has moved from captivity to sin and death, through the desert of repentance, into the waters of baptism, to rise into new life in Christ.

Just from this brief exploration of the symbolic context alone, we can now look at John's appearance in the wilderness with new eyes. He is God's prophet of renewal, leading the people back to God through his baptism of repentance. John prepares the way for the Messiah by making the people ready to receive the Lord Most High through the forgiveness of their sins. John is intimately connected to the continuance of God's work in salvation history by another strong link to the beloved prophet Isaiah. Luke quotes from Isaiah 40:3, "A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God...." Now listen again to the words of John from Luke, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight...." Not only is John now identified as the voice crying out in the wilderness, but we now have a much more

personal reference to God as Lord, and we are being told to make **his** paths straight. As we will see later in Luke, John has come proclaiming a very specific person as Messiah, namely Jesus.

This movement from wilderness to repentance is significant for you and me as well. In our own continuing preparations to celebrate the Christ child once again into our lives, we have to make our own paths straight. Advent is a time of reflection and cleansing, repentance and forgiveness. Repentance is more than being sorry for what we have done or left undone, it is a genuine heartfelt desire to amend our lives, turning back towards God and aligning our wills with God's will. In effect, the forgiveness of sins has a communal dimension as well as a personal scope. Our sinful behavior excludes us from the community of God's people. In seeking forgiveness, we are fully restored to that community. The root of the word forgiveness comes from the Greek meaning "to let go". Only God has the authority and power to let go of our sins. In our repentance, we come humbly before God and say "yes" to God's extended hand of grace delivering each of us from evil.

The Israelites have wandered far from God, and John is offering God's forgiveness through the baptism of repentance. For the Israelites, accepting John's baptism of repentance makes them humble before God, ready to submit to God's work, and ready to see, hear and receive the Messiah. For modern day Christians, our baptismal promise is to repent and return to the Lord when we fall into sin; and to continue Christ's mission of striving for justice and peace. These positive acts make straight *our* wandering ways in preparation for the Lord's coming again in glory. According to Luther's small catechism our, "Baptism is not simply plain water. Instead, it is water used according to God's command and connected with God's word." He goes on to tell us that God's word is the great commission found in Matthew 28, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This is God's desire for all creation, to be reconciled to Him through Christ, our Lord.

This time last year, we studied the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel, and you may remember that another major theme in Luke is the universal nature of God's plan of salvation. This is highlighted for us here in the rest of the paraphrase from the prophet Isaiah, "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Isaiah speaks of the revelation of God's glory, but this is more. Jesus is the One in whom the salvation of all creation rests. The universally available gift of salvation through faith in Christ is not the same as the popular notion of universalism. God offers the gift of salvation through faith in His only Son, Jesus Christ. Everyone has the God-given freedom of choice to accept or refuse God's gift. The question at stake here is not religious tolerance, or the emotionally charged humanistic argument that if God was really Good, everyone would go to heaven. Those are just distractions. No one has the authority to judge the soul of another except God alone. The real issue here is speaking the truth in love. God is perfect Truth. As followers of Jesus, we believe Him to be God incarnate, and therefore the most perfect revelation of divine Truth the world has ever seen. The real question then is not whether my Muslim neighbor or Hindu friend is going to heaven. Only God can and will determine that issue, according to His perfect justice and mercy. The question we face as Christians is whether you and I have the courage to share the good news of Jesus Christ, as we have been commissioned to do by our Lord, and to live our own lives in such a way that others are drawn to God in Christ.

You and I live in ambivalent times between two great Advents, the first in which Christ comes into the world, and the second when Christ comes to judge both the living and the dead. William Stringfellow tells it like this. "Christ the Lord comes as Judge of the world and of all the world's thrones and pretenders, sovereignties and dominions, ... presidencies and regimes, in vindication of His lordship and the reign of the Word of God in history. This is the truth, which the world hates, which [Christians] ... bear and by which [we] live as the church in the world." In our own way, let us each prepare the way of the Lord, and make straight his paths.

Amen.