

SPG#222, ADVENT 2C

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Baruch 5:1-9

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

Some time ago in my formal education I learned that every story has a setting: a time and a place and persons who are the characters in the story. Stories also usually have a main idea. The setting in today's gospel is Palestine in the first century AD. Characters include John the Baptizer and his listeners. The main idea is getting prepared for the coming of Christ. It is the story of the first Advent:

The writer of the gospel of Luke is very careful to identify the time and place of the account. He says,
In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberias Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis and Lysanias, tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness; and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the

rough ways shall be made smooth;

After being very careful to establish the setting: time, place, and person, the writer of Luke delivers the punch line, the point of the whole account, the meaning of Advent,

And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

For Luke the energy he spent in pointing out time, place, and person contributed to the main point. Without the possibility of the direct encounter with the Christ child the other aspects of the setting would have made little difference.

But, however, it really is important to know something about the setting in which the first Advent took place. It is important to know who were the rulers, what was the year, what was the political climate, who was in power. It is important to know who was high priest for the Jews in this time. The writer seems to indicate that this is a real time, with real people. John was a flesh and blood man. The writer establishes the first Advent as a fact.

One could make a point here that Luke is subtly suggesting that all stories having to do with Jesus Christ have settings that are important. But whatever the story their importance is seen in light of the main point.

Our story is the coming of Christ in our own time - Advent, 2009.

I am confident that all of us know who we are, what the date is, what the location is, what makes up the political climate. We probably take for granted the fact of our historical existence.

The characters in this story are us. And although John the Baptizer is not here in the flesh to say it, the punch line, the main point is the same, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God."

And so all of our preparations in Advent, all of our individual situations have an importance as they relate to the coming of the Child.

Several years ago the movie, "Back to the Future," with Michael J. Fox, was popular. The story is remarkable because it moves back and forth between two time periods.

Today we have our own "Back to the Future" as we move between the first Advent and Advent 2009. And I think that this is what the Apostle Luke had in mind. That we would read the story of the coming of the Child enough that we eventually integrate our own stories into his story. If we do this enough: read the scriptural account and apply it to our own time, we eventually begin to see our own times in a more penetrating way. And eventually we begin to see ourselves in a more penetrating way.

In recent years via war, economic downturn, and increasing climate change, we have been witness to changes in our larger lives that were not seen before the year 2000.

But even with all of that going on, in America, life for most of us continues predictably. The sun will come up. The sun will go down. It will be wet. It will be dry. It will be warm. It

will be cold. We will have good days. We will have days that are not so good.

If we make a list of items that comprise typical American life we get a picture of how much predictability is a factor: taking a shower, brushing your teeth, breakfast cereal, cup of coffee, read the paper, get dressed, start the car, go to work/school, work with the same people day in and day out, come home, have supper, watch TV, go to bed.

Through advances in many areas we have achieved a certain level of comfort. Along with that comfort has come a predictability that we live with every day.

Predictability breeds a special kind of problem.

Namely, **we are hard to impress.**

For us to be impressed, it has to get our attention and hold it. It has to be entertaining. If it is not entertaining, it is boring, and usually not worthy of our attention.

And it is not a customary thing to read stories that call upon us to fill in the blanks from out of our own lives.

Predictably, the impact of Advent, at least at first, is not tremendous. Although sometimes, it can lay claim to being the time where the warm feeling of Christmas begins.

If we are able, then, to lay aside our preoccupation with

predictability and routine we will realize that Advent is about God. And it is about us. And if we allow that truth to penetrate then we will resonate with probably the most outrageous character in the New Testament, John the Baptizer:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

John makes the outrageous claim that the coming of the Messiah is imminent.

John himself, as the embodiment of the first Advent was pretty outrageous himself: clothed in camel's hair, eating wild locusts and honey. An outrageous man with a message for all people in all times.

So smelly, so different, so outrageous. Wouldn't it have been nice if he could have been like Paul Revere, riding on a horse, announcing the coming of the Messiah? But John the Baptizer was who he was.

If he were here in the flesh today, and we found him revolting, but at the same time he fixed our attention on Jesus Christ, then I think he would be pleased. And if we found him smelly, but he led us to think about ourselves in relation to Jesus, then I think he would be pleased.

Luke speaks in gigantic, monumental terms: valleys being filled, the mountains and hills made low, the crooked made straight, the rough ways made smooth. In other words, whatever is in the way of our seeing and encountering Christ needs to be dealt with. If it is predictability, or a tendency to not be impressed, we need to set about the task of filling that valley or lowering that mountain. If it is distractions of whatever kind, we need to make the crooked straight and the rough places smooth. That is preparation. That is Advent.

Two stories, two times, many characters over centuries.
One message for all persons in all times and in all settings.

In Advent we are supposed to prepare. And like other people in other ages, we are supposed to prepare because we need to prepare. And in our preparation we are supposed to anticipate, and then finally we are supposed to see and feel in our own lives: the Messiah, the Christ, the baby, the salvation of God.
Amen.