

SERMON ADVENT II

LUKE 3.1-6

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St. Luke goes to some length to ground us in the Roman Empire's rulers and governors of the day plus two Jerusalem temple high priests. Who told you that the Gospel has no politics! Turns out the Good News is not about eternal truths, or a Greek or Roman pantheon of deities, or a distant creator who wound up the clock once upon a time and set the earth in motion. No. This liturgical season is about our God who gets her hands dirty, who is liable to turn up in the most unlikely places and work surprises from the outside in.

As Christmas candy I give you Clarence Jordan, a pioneering Christian in Georgia especially during the 60's and 70's at his Koinonia Farm. It was an integrated place and therefore subject to attack, but truly an outpost of the Gospel. He and Jimmy Carter were friends. Jordan translated a lot of the New Testament into "Georgia," doing the same thing Luke was doing. Here is today's Gospel from the Cottonpatch Bible:

Now during the fifteenth year of Tiberias as President, while Pontius Pilot was governor of Georgia, and Herod was governor of Alabama, his brother Philip being governor of Mississippi, and Lysanias still holding out over Arkansas, while Annas and Caiphas were co-presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention, the word of God came to Zack's boy, John, down on the farm. And he went all around in the rural areas preaching a dipping in water—a symbol of a changed way of life as the basis for getting things straightened out.

Now you and I can do the same thing for the USA and Iowa, but what's important is, do you find the Holy Spirit doing things in the midst of the Legislature or back in the coat closet? Are you looking for that transforming presence, or do you just say to yourself "God couldn't do anything with this Court or that Congress so let 'em go and work for the next election." ?? When you do that you are telling God that he has his limits. (I think that is a classical heresy).

John the Baptist turns up in the Judean wilderness, of course. Pretty dry, empty place. Interpret "wilderness" very broadly. A place of severe austerity and upheaval, where your suburban ways of coping just don't work. Your assumptions about life may have to go, too. You are not in control.

Chaotic times are wilderness also. John knew that. Herod's taxes brought great suffering, dislocation and homelessness as people lost their small farm plots, and the resident army enforced it all. New movements spawned. Every now and then a rebellion soon squashed. One of the Herod's sons killed the Baptist as well. Tension always in the air.

A pandemic is chaos and desert writ large. Our COVID 19 attack and its variants bear all the wilderness features. We have lost much control of how things go but we resist adapting to the ways of the wilderness. I think some of the mask controversy comes from a wish to restore our former order, even if it kills us. Death is in the air, too.

In the desert you adapt to its ways or you die. But the air can be clear there and your load lighter. You may see yourself better, too. You may realize that you want to see more of your family after having to work at home for so long, or enjoy wearing pajama bottoms for Zoom meetings. The wilderness can be a place of immense creativity. Remember, the three Abrahamic religions all launched in the desert, in the wilderness.

Into the wilderness and chaos comes John. Preaching repentance, which can mean quit your lowdown ways, or turn your life around, or let go of your excess baggage and self-centeredness, or purify your heart, or start learning compassion, or just plain turn around and look at yourself from a different perspective.

Author Marlena Graves put it this way: “The first step of repentance is telling the truth about ourselves.” It can take a while to get there, yes? In the Celtic Christian tradition you need an “anamchara,” a soul friend, someone with whom we can share everything that is deep in our hearts in order to work on our own truth.

And it is taking us a long time to tell the truth about our American history about race and indigenous peoples. It is awesome and painful to see the earthquake of the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter events bringing in reaction a tidal wave of state legislation and school system changes to try to keep things buttoned up. Every day I pray for this state and our country. Our citizenry needs many anamchara, many soul friends. John the Baptist is not telling us how bad we are, but how we need to clear the decks for a life in the Spirit.

The 2nd/3rd century North African theologian Tertullian agrees, saying that the call for “repentance should...prepare the home of the heart, by making it clean, for the Holy Spirit....”

We have many ways to prepare for Christmas, so this year how about including John the Baptizer? It was about this time of year when my mother would marshal her plans, her equipment and her ingredients for making Swedish cookies. Lest you think all she was doing was making cookies, she was one half Swede. Her favorite grandparent was her Swedish grandmother Hilda Leiden. Growing up in Yonkers in the Hudson Valley, it turned out that Mom had Swedish relatives on a farm most of the way to Albany. She, her sister and mom would visit them occasionally, and at least one summer she did nanny for their children up there on the farm. But she never spoke about it to us.

I think making Swedish cookies was a meditation on who she really was underneath other family issues and distractions. I guess that she cleared the counters in the kitchen to let a semi-private truth live in her heart for a season, for she loved her Swedish life even though both parents could scoff at it. And then she married a very German. And those were goood cookies.

However you prepare this Advent for the coming of the Child, allow John Baptist to help you to the truth so that you may welcome the Holy Spirit and your joy may be complete.