

“John The Baptist” - Rev. Jennifer Adams
December 6, 2009 - Advent 2C

Last week, as we began a new Church year on Advent I we also shifted to Year C of the three-year lectionary cycle of readings, which means that our primary gospel for the year is Luke. And whenever we shift to a new gospel, I like to give you a little heads up on what to expect so here's some basics on Luke. As you probably noticed from today's reading, this gospel was written in a way that was particularly attentive to surrounding details, in a manner almost like a historian of that time would have written. And that way of writing makes Luke different than the other gospels. For example, last Advent II we heard Mark dive into the telling of the story of John the Baptist with a very short and sweet "This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." And by line two of that gospel we were already out in the wilderness. The gospel of John, on the other hand, tends more towards the mystical, poetic and cosmic sort of opening to the story, "in the beginning was the Word and the word was with God" and a few verses later, John the Baptist is introduced as the one who comes to "testify to the light." Matthew gives us a little more context in his gospel, but not in quite as particular or fussy a fashion as Luke does. From the very opening line of this gospel Luke is clear about his approach to the telling of this story: "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us," says chapter 1, verse 1, I too decided after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you." Luke knew that he was doing something others had attempted to do, but he was intent on getting it all down right, and more elaborately than had been done before. He gave more detail, offered more context and was very particular about the construction and order of his writing.

And so, as Luke brings John and others onto the scene he's very clear about the context and the complexity of the context into which Christ was born. Listen again to how he sets the stage for the Baptist's arrival on the scene: "this was the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas." This obviously isn't just "the wilderness" for Luke it's an historical setting complete with political and religious leaders who had some sort of power in the world. I read this week that on his way from Jerusalem to Rome, Luke includes not only the poor, the lame, the needy and the blind but also the synagogue rulers, high priests, governors, kings, treasurers, city officials, imperial guards and even the emperor himself. One of the things that Luke is very clear about is that the reality that Jesus was born into and died within was a political and religious one, complete with the complexities of human institutions and powers and games and fears and struggles that are a part of life in the world. Luke's Jesus was a Jesus who came into the world. Into the real world.

The other context that Luke is clear about and gives great detail to support is the context of salvation history, the tradition of God caring for and guiding the covenant community forward in their journey with God. John the Baptist enters as one in a long line of what our collect this morning calls "the messengers, the prophets," the voices in the wilderness who had spoken to God's people proclaiming warning and promise and hope. Luke is very clear to introduce John in the manner that Old Testament prophets were introduced, he even quotes from Isaiah in the passage we heard today and he is clear to have people throughout the gospel recognize Jesus as

the hoped for Messiah, the one for whom Israel was waiting. Part of Luke's point is that Jesus is the one the prophets have been saying to look for. So for Luke, while Jesus was born into the real world, he is very clear that that real world was God's.

And then Luke took one more step . This real world that God made and was working to save, this world that Jesus was born into that was full of religious and political leaders had more people in it than simply the Covenant people. This world had the people Israel in it, but there were Gentiles there too, those who were previously not considered to be included in the hoped for salvation. One of the BIG surprises in this gospel is that Luke's Jesus comes so that "all flesh might see the salvation of God." And that fulfilled the prophecies but it also broke them wide open to be far more wide-reaching, inclusive and welcoming to all. So tucked inside the beautiful, detailed language of this gospel there was a huge challenge: Jesus was not only the glory of Israel, but to also a light for the world, all the world.

And we can hear our challenge in there too, in all of it. This is the first year in which Barack Obama is President of the United States. Jennifer Granholm is Governor of Michigan. Katherine Jefferts Schori is our Presiding Bishop and Robert Geper our Bishop. The word of God has come and a voice cries out in the wilderness, "Prepare the Way of the Lord!" The challenge is helping the good news be born into our context – not just our sanctuary or our church or what we might categorize as "our spiritual life" but letting Christ be born into every piece of our lives, the day-to-day, the institutional, the political, the stuff that tends to be considered human or "non-spiritual" realities of life. According to Luke, all of that is affected and potentially redeemed by Christ's presence. And still surprising, that presence is big enough, wise enough, loving enough to handle all - Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants, Conservatives and Liberals, Episcopalians and Anglicans. In Baruch's words that all may "walk safely in the glory of God." The challenge of Luke's gospel is to imagine such a world. May we be as particular and as demanding as he.

Amen.