

The Rev. Jason Haddox, 9 December 2018
St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Norman Oklahoma
Advent 2, Year C: Baruch 5:1-9; The Song of Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79, BCP 92);
Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife... ‘My dear Mr. Bennet’ said his lady to him one day, ‘have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?’ Mr. Bennet replied that he had not... ‘Do you not want to know who has taken it?’ cried his wife impatiently. ‘*You* want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.’ That was invitation enough.”

Thus the scene is set for the adventures of the Bennet family in Jane Austen’s comedy of manners, *Pride and Prejudice*. In a very few lines, the author signals what is to follow, and what to pay attention to, in the story about to unfold.

“Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you’d expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn’t hold with such nonsense...The Dursleys had everything they wanted, but they also had a secret, and their greatest fear was that somebody would discover it. They didn’t think they could bear it if anyone found out about the Potters.” The opening lines of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*.

Who are we dealing with here? What is their motivation? How will they respond to the challenges about to be visited upon them?

In our gospel reading this morning, the author is setting the scene for what is to follow, and places that scene prominently upon the world stage. We learn of the Emperor, the Governor, the regional administrators and district supervisors, the religious and civic leaders, the mayor and city council and all the rest... So many details! Who cares?

Theophilus cares.

At the very beginning of the Gospel of Luke, in the first lines of the first chapter, before the story gets underway, we hear: “Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”

We hear Theophilus addressed again, at the beginning of the Book of Acts, a.k.a. “volume two” of Luke’s Gospel. The scholars are uncertain about who this Theophilus might have been: “probably the author’s patron, but otherwise unknown” according to the Harper-Collins Study Edition of the NRSV. But here’s the thing: “Theophilus”= “lover of God.” Literally, that’s what the word means. Someone—anyone—who is a lover of God. It might be a proper name, but it doesn’t have to be. Anyone wanting to know more clearly, love more dearly, follow more nearly the teachings and way of Jesus could be called “Theophilus.” That could be any one of us. The recipient of the message could be an individual, or all of us together. (Turn to your neighbor: “Good morning Theophilus!”)

So the author of Luke-Acts declares to “Theophilus”/Lover of God/Dear Reader, that all these things described hereafter took place at a particular place, in a particular time, in a particular way. They did not simply happen “a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...” (Yet another splendid setting of the stage, thank you George Lucas) but in an identifiable context and culture that the author takes great pains to identify as specifically as possible.

At that particular time and place, we are told, “the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.” We’ve already met John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, earlier in the Gospel, and we’ve been told that he’s going to be someone special in his own right. In fact, we just said/sang the Song of Zechariah this morning:

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, *
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
To give his people knowledge of salvation *
by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God *
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, *
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

John, son of Zechariah the priest, does not become a priest like his father. John, son of Elizabeth the prophet, becomes a prophet like his mother, and receives “the word of God” in the wilderness. In the Bible, “the wilderness” is the place where God’s people are stripped of their illusions of control and self-sufficiency, the place of austerity and silence where God is made most clearly and particularly known.

John is presented as a prophet like Isaiah, who is described as:

“The voice of one crying out 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 made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

John is calling on his hearers to “Get ready! Clear the way; prepare to welcome the coming of God! Or at least get out of the way, before you get yourselves run over!”

John comes, we are told, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” That’s pretty dense language. “Baptism”—a ritual washing, which was already an established tradition among certain groups in first-century Palestine and elsewhere, not a new phenomenon of John’s invention. “Repentance”= “metanoia”, change your mind, change your thinking, turn around, know and live into God’s presence even now, in and among each and all of us. “For the forgiveness of sins.” At once expressing both the longing to be forgiven—that is, set in right relationship again with God and neighbor, and simultaneously embodying a trusting attitude that, indeed, God desires that same righteous relationship and behavior between persons and God’s own self.

The Gospel this morning is all about (and entirely focused on) setting the stage for what is about to happen. Although we greet it as we always do with “The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” and conclude with “Praise to you, Lord Christ” on this particular day Jesus himself doesn’t actually appear in the story. He is just offstage, behind the curtain. John the Baptizer is front and center, but even he doesn’t have any speaking parts this week. (Don’t worry, we’ll get an earful from him next Sunday—come and listen!)

Rather, we hear about “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” and the words of Isaiah, promising the filling of low places, and straightening of crooked ways. The pulling down of mountains, and the smoothing of rough and rocky paths. “And all flesh—all people, every one—shall see the salvation of God.” All this, so that the Lord will come; or is it that, in the coming of the Lord, all this shall be accomplished? (As a good Episcopalian, I want to read it as both/and, thank you very much.) So that God will come; in the coming, God will accomplish all this.

For us as Christians, baptism is certainly about repentance and the forgiveness of sin; it is also about dying and rising in Christ, being made part of the Body of Christ, receiving the Holy Spirit and being sent into the world as Christ’s followers, and much more still.

But today, as we wait for the Advent (the coming, the arrival) of the one who has come, and is coming, and is already present among us, I wonder...

What mountains need to be pulled down in your life?
What valleys need to be filled up?
What rocky rough places need to be cleared out,
for God to be able to find you?

What metanoia—
change of mind, change of thinking, change of behavior—
would “clear the way”
to allow God to come close to you today?

How do you want to “set the stage” this year?
What needs to stay,
what needs to go,
in order for you and I
to tell the story of the Gospel,
the Good News of God’s love revealed in Jesus,
in my life, in your life, in our life together?

I wonder...