

PREPARING FOR THE NEW REALITY

Luke 3:1-6

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, December 6, 2015

History tells us the world Jesus was born into worshipped multiple gods. The Romans borrowed heavily from the Greek myths, paying homage to Zeus, Jupiter, Mars and a whole host of others. There were the Mystery Religions, secret cults offering people personal religious experiences through secret rituals that were never revealed to outsiders. Then there was Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest monotheistic religions from ancient Persia. It's possible that at least one of the Wise Men from the East who came looking for the Christ Child in Bethlehem was Zoroastrian. Apart from Zoroastrianism, these other religions' gods were mythical characters. A myth is a story that has a meaning but no basis in fact. For example, Hercules was not an historical person but the stories about him overcoming adversity inspired the ancient Greeks to live nobly, a good thing.

Then there was a god-man named Apollonius. It was said Apollonius was the son of a god and a mortal woman, that he preached good news, healed the sick, and descended into the underworld before being assumed into heaven.

There's a reason I'm giving you all this information about the religious beliefs in Jesus' time and I'll get to it in just a moment.

Today's text is taken from the Gospel of Luke. It is believed by scholars that Luke was a Greek physician who lived in the city of Antioch in ancient Syria. According to tradition Luke died a martyr's death in 84 A.D.

Of the four gospel writers, Luke saw himself as an historian. He was very intentional in placing his narrative of Jesus in an historical setting. He alone tells us Jesus was born when the Emperor Augustus decreed that all the world should be registered for the census. Later at the beginning of his third chapter, (today's text) Luke reports the Emperor Tiberius was in the fifteenth year of his reign, Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea, Herod was the ruler of Galilee and his brother Phillip ruled over several regions whose names are too hard to pronounce. Finally Luke reminds his readers that Caiaphas and Annas were the rulers of the Jerusalem temple.

Why all this factual information? Because Luke is drawing a contrast between Jesus of Nazareth and the gods of the ancient world by making the point that Jesus was as real as Augustus, Tiberius, Pontius Pilate and the rest of them. Jesus lived in a particular time, he lived in an actual place. Jesus was not a mythical being. By giving us an exact time and place in the context of world history, serious modern historians can and have affirmed the facts Luke provides. Luke's story isn't just another fable, it happened in real time.

Of course, some would argue even though Jesus was an historical person the stories of his miracles and resurrection were just myths made up by his followers. But the counter argument can be made that no one ever came forward, who witnessed the miracles or the resurrection, and said it was all bunk. Hundreds if not thousands of people saw Jesus healing the lame and multiplying the loaves and fishes but no one is on record ever saying it wasn't so except for the false witnesses at Jesus' trial in a kangaroo court. Quite the contrary, the people who were there spread the news. As for the disciples, not one of them ever came forward to confess the resurrection was a hoax. In fact, they were all put to death because they wouldn't recant (except for John the Beloved disciple who died of natural causes).

But Luke wasn't only concerned with historical accuracy, he was primarily focused on making a confession of faith: Jesus was a real flesh and blood human being, and the Son of God, born into our world to change history.

And his cousin John the Baptist became the hinge of world history.

John was the last of the Old Testament Prophets and his ministry was all about proclaiming the beginning of the new era of salvation history. Through Jesus of Nazareth God was breaking into human events to change the world and everyone in it, Jews and Gentiles alike.

But Luke had something else in mind when he included the names of the Roman Emperors and their officials. Besides setting the historical context of the Christ Event, Luke is also naming the power structure, the world system's political, economic and religious organizations that need to be upended. The Caesars, the Pilates, the Herods and everything they represented had to be redeemed by Christ. That explains why John the Baptist, in preparing the way of the Lord, called for repentance. Before the world can change we need to be challenged to turn away from the status quo and turn to the new reality Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

In his opening salvo on the world system, operating in opposition to the authority of God, John the Baptist quotes the prophet Isaiah:

“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.”

In ancient times, before a king went out on a journey, workers were sent ahead to not just repair but reconstruct the roadways. Isaiah used this metaphor and it suited John the Baptist. Knowing the Lord is coming God's people must prepare the way by preparing themselves. The old ways, our ways, are not good enough. God wants more from us. That was John's message.

We need to be humbled and made straight before we can ever appreciate the salvation of God. Otherwise we'll remain stuck, never knowing a New Beginning, only knowing a world system forever in conflict with Christ's reign of justice and peace.

Luke's theme of Christ coming to turn the world upside down begins at the opening of his gospel at Mary's annunciation. In her magnificat she expresses awe that God chose her, a simple peasant girl, and goes on to praise God for dethroning the powerful and exalting the weak.

We really need to pay attention to these verses and not sentimentalize them. If we take John's preaching and Mary's prophecies seriously we have no choice but to conclude that the world system created by the rich and powerful we live under is inherently corrupt and sinful.

But it's not just economic and political systems that need to be transformed. Individual hearts and minds of the rich and powerful as well as the poor and weak and everyone in between also need straightening out.

It would be a mistake to assume John's preaching only demands our best behavior and simple piety. We especially are called to practice radical righteousness towards one another because we are created to be in relationships, not with just our family and friends and members of the same tribe but anyone crossing our paths. That explains why Isaiah and later the Baptist ended with, "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." (Luke 3:6) In the genealogy tracing Jesus' ancestry it ends with Joseph but it begins with Adam. Christ is a son of Adam and the Son of God. All flesh is invited to share in the salvation Christ brings.

Everything I just said about John's purpose and message you've heard before. It's all about repentance and salvation, turning away from the world we created and coming home to the world God intended it to be, a good world free of sin and sadness. But how do we get there from here?

The easy answer is follow Jesus and let him show us the way to his Kingdom not of this world. Yes, heaven is our desired destination but Jesus preached God's Kingdom is already here, emerging from our broken world.

Unfortunately God's will isn't always done on earth as it is in heaven. Why? There are still multiple gods vying for our attention. Zeus, Jupiter, Apollonius have been replaced by latter day myths.

All the more reason for us to have a plan to prepare the way for the Lord's coming. *These Days* provides daily devotionals throughout the year and you will find the Advent edition in the Narthex. One thing I like about *These Days* is that at the bottom of each daily devotional there is an action plan, encouraging the reader to plan an action to do something in response to the scripture reading. It may be to visit an elderly neighbor or volunteer in a soup kitchen. Do something important that will show the love of Christ to your neighbor.

However your action plan to do something significant is more satisfying if you first seek to be someone significant. By that I mean coming to the realization that you are a child of God. What's more you have a critical role to play and the world God loves is waiting for you to participate in the world's renewal.

In Romans 8 the Apostle Paul wrote: "Our present sufferings pale in comparison to the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager anticipation, (on tiptoes) for the children of God to be revealed...in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage...and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God...the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."
(Romans 8:18-22)

Could this mean the world is groaning because of the broken relationship between humanity and the creation itself? Could it also mean that the broken world we find ourselves in can be traced to the failure of God's people to love the Lord our God by forsaking other gods (materialism and nationalism) and buying into their myths? If that's the case, the results are self-evident.

The season of Advent gives us the opportunity to take a bold look at our attitudes and behaviors, to examine our perceptions and priorities and when necessary to be changed. The time has come to prepare the way of the Lord who comes to be with us. God is here in you and me and the world around us. Jesus came, Jesus is still coming and Jesus will come again until the creation's groaning becomes a joyful song that never ends.

Around the Lord's Table we can hear sounds of groaning mixed in with joyful singing. It's a mysterious experience of suffering and healing, defeat and victory, glory and sorrow, through it all God is with us as the miracle of the incarnation becomes flesh once again in our time and place in you and me.

Quiet yourself and prepare yourself to be with Jesus in the Upper Room. Take and eat, take and drink and know the salvation of the Lord.