Fulfilling Our Promises

Luke 3:1-6
Sunday, December 8, 2024
The Second Sunday of Advent
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Luke's introduction of John sets the stage for proclaiming the Gospel's message of salvation and hope.

Even though John the Baptist appears every Christmas, his Advent arrival always feels a bit shocking. He shows up like an odd relative, a distant cousin or crazy uncle. He lives off the grid, way out in the middle of nowhere. His opinions are unpopular, and his diet is downright weird. He shows up at your door and immediately you're asking, "Honey, did we buy any of those non-GMO locusts for Uncle John? And as soon as he opens his mouth, you have the sneaking suspicion that something he has said or will say in the future is going to land him in jail.

And yet, he's always there, and his presence is both predictable but still unsettling. And his messages are also a strange blend of words both terrifying and comforting. He's not the guest we might ordinarily invite, but as soon as he shows up we know he's meant to be there.

John is not someone you'll find hanging around the creche on Christmas Eve. Yet he shows up every Advent and his message remains the same: God is coming. You better be prepared to be surprised. God's promises will be fulfilled.

But to hear that message we first need to clear a path through the tall grass of Luke's introduction. I am willing to guess that unless you are prepping to be the next Bible Quiz Bowl champion, Luke's historical round up left your mind wandering. His words sound like answers to Jeopardy questions: "As named in Luke, chapter three, this emperor reigned in AD 29." Oooh! Ooh! "I know! Who is Tiberius Caesar?" Or perhaps they cause us to giggle as Dr. Kim Wagner of Princeton Seminary suggests, at how these names sound more like diseases than persons – "Hey, Doc, I've been having a serious flare up of Trachonitis, and I'm hoping that it's not turning into Ituraea again."

While we are tempted to relegate these passages to the so-called “fly over” territory of the Bible, Luke is doing more than merely padding the pages with text.

Luke is intent on telling a story. It’s an astonishing story, one that fills him with passion and life. And he tells it the only way he can.

Yesterday, on December 7, I noticed that the American flag was flying at half-mast. And then I remember: December 7, 1941, the attack on Pearl Harbor…a day which will live in infamy. It made me think of Ben Uyesato, a former member of Woodlawn Chapel who died a few years ago. Ben was a Japanese American, a native of Hawaii. He was on his way to Sunday School on December 7, 1941, when he saw Japanese planes flying low over the sugar cane plantation near his house. Seven years later, Ben could tell that story as if it had happened yesterday. His family told me that sometimes they thought Ben might have been embellishing the story – and if you knew Ben, you knew that could be a possibility. But he told that story the only way he could: a story of passion, of conviction.

Luke tells the story of John in ways that are both eternally timeless and historically precise. The historical accuracy matters less than the breath-taking, astonishing message Luke needs to share:

“Do not be afraid—for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David s Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

That is the story which matters: our God is coming to us, and now is the time to be prepared. Now is the time to fulfill our promises.

Luke writes with the passion of an author who knows the story he tells is too important not to be told. Think of it: the scandal of the creator of the universe dwelling with human beings, the risk of God taking on our flesh and living among ordinary persons like Mary and Joseph. The power of God’s word coming down to a man like John.

The story is grounded with the same sort of precision that Luke scatters across the gospel. This is the way Luke speaks: In the sixth month. In those days. When the eighth day came. These details call us to pay attention. Even if we have heard this story time and time again, John’s appearance demands our response.

Hear it once more in the words of the Common English Bible:

In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene, [2] during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God's word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. [3] John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins[1]

My friend Tom Willadsen suggested we might put it this way:

In the waning days of the administration of Joe Biden, as President-elect Donald Trump is nominating cabinet members, the autumn when the Los Angeles Dodgers defeated the New York Yankees in a reprise of the most frequent World Series pairing, as Israel is fighting a two front war in Gaza and against Hezbollah and famines continue in Yemen and Sudan, when Shaboozey's "A Bar Song" set the record for most weeks at #1 on the Billboard Hot 100…can we hear the voice of one crying out in the wilderness? Are we preparing the way for the Lord?[2]

In this time, at this moment, are we doing what we can to fulfill our purpose as God's people?

During this second week of Advent, Luke writes about two ways of telling time. He shows us the layers of ordinary history but then reminds us God enters that ordinary. This is the message John offers us today: to know what time it is. To know that now is the time for us to do the things God has asked of us. John calls us to know what time it is. His sudden appearance in the wilderness is a reminder of the surprising ways God shows up in our lives. The Gospel reminds us that God comes not to the rich and to the powerful, but to barefooted little boys tramping through sugar cane plantations at the start of one of history's worst days. God comes to a man way out in the wilderness named John, and gives him a word. God comes to parents who are rushing around trying their best to hold things together, to keep up with the demands of culture while also trying to care for children. God

[1] *Common English Bible* (Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2011), Lk 3:1–3.

[2] Tom Willadsen, "What Time Is It?" *The Immediate Word*, sermonsuite.com, 12/8/2024

comes to caregivers who are tenderly watching over loved ones sinking further into dementia. God comes to us in moments when our bodies are weary and tired. This is the surprising news which God declares. This is the promise of a God who is fulfilling God's promises.

God calls out to us, reminding us that crooked paths will be made straight, empty valleys shall be filled, and rough places smoothed. God's promised coming to us calls us to lean into the awareness that good news will soon shine through the cracked and broken places of this world's most desperate and agonizing pain.

The late Richard Gaillardetz was a Catholic theologian whose last book was a compilation of his meditations and reflections on cancer. Written primarily for his family, Gaillardetz shared his experiences of living with a terminal illness as an integral part of his journey of faith. As he underwent treatments one December, he wrote of his growing understanding of the meaning of Advent's call to wait during his own "waiting season." He reflects on two experiences of time: our basic human experience of chronological time – the months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds that fill our lives, and Kairos time—sacred moments that "transcend measurement." "We love ourselves in the gaze of a sublime work of art or in the look of delight on the face of a friend upon seeing us unexpectedly. It is a moment ripe with memory, expectation, hope, and fullness—time suffused with the eternal now of the divine." Kairos time is pregnant with possibility, with grace, with hope. This is Advent's hope: the time has been fulfilled. We trust in the one who has come, and who will come to us once more. *Amen.*