

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 12/05/2021



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Second Sunday in Advent

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, December 5th

Luke 3:1-6

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Preparation

Last week's Gospel lection took us to the end of the story. This week we focus on the beginning with the Word of God coming to John the Baptist in the wilderness. Next week's Gospel lection focuses more on the message of John the Baptist while the text for this Second Sunday of Advent emphasizes the theme of preparation. This week's text also alludes to the coming conflict between the two kingdoms. The text references the representative leaders of the worldly kingdoms of Rome and Israel while God's Word appears to a son of an obscure priest in the wilderness. God's reign will shortly begin. The Kingdom will come with the birth of Christ but not be fully consummated until Christ's return. As we prepare during this Advent season for the Nativity of our Lord and look forward to the second Advent, we are reminded that only Christ is the source of hope and peace. As we prepare the way in our own lives, we have a decision to make. Are we messengers of Christmas or merely consumers of Christmas?

Luke 3:1-6 Commentary

¹ *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*

In the opening verses of Luke's Gospel, he states the purpose of his work as being "to write an orderly account..." (1:3). Of the four Gospel writers, it is Luke who writes most like a modern historian and this is evident in the opening verses of this week's Gospel lection. Luke provides the precise details to date the start of John's ministry to 29 A.D. (plus or minus a year). Luke also provides the names of the leaders from the top down in the hierarchy of the political systems that governed the area. He begins with the Roman Empire, then takes it down to the local rulers, both civil (Roman puppet kings) and religious. Luke thus locates the Gospel in a specific time and place. These worldly kingdoms represented by those named would eventually oppose Jesus' ministry. Not surprisingly, it is the same case today.

Despite the pedigree of leaders mentioned, the Word of God came to the son of an obscure priest. The expression, "The word of God came to..." places John in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets (e.g., Jeremiah 1:2). But John was not just any prophet. This was the first time God had spoke in this way since Malachi, approximately 460 years earlier. Jesus said of John, "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John" (Luke 7:28a). John was the greatest prophet of Old Testament and the pivot point on which history turns from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

Not only does God speak to a relative nobody, but it also occurred in the wilderness – the place where God first shaped His chosen people.

³ *And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,*

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

⁵ *Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall become straight,*

*and the rough places shall become level ways,
⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”*

Locating John’s ministry in the wilderness indicates the promises of Isaiah are beginning to be fulfilled. Verses 4-6 are based on Isaiah 40:3-5 and define the context of John’s ministry as a messenger. The Lord Himself is coming to bring salvation. When a king proposed to visit his dominions, he would send a messenger before him to tell the people to prepare the roads - make the paths straight. John the Baptist is the messenger of the Lord, and when the Lord comes, great transformations will occur - valleys will be filled, mountains made low, crooked become straight, rough becoming level. This symbolism also has ethical undertones as well as transformations within society. This is something that will involve all people (all flesh), not just the Jews.

John is proclaiming a baptism of repentance. John’s immediate audience would have been familiar with two types of baptism. One was the baptism which was part of the process by which a Gentile could become a Jewish proselyte and begin a new way of life. The other was the ritual immersions of the Essenes (a very conservative Jewish sect and smaller in number than the Pharisees and Sadducees) that also required a change of heart. Both baptisms required a change of behavior. The word translated as “repentance” is the Greek word *metanoia*. The literal meaning of *metanoia* is “change of mind”. The full meaning of repentance in this context is not simply a mindset of regret or guilt but to have a complete change of mind; a decision to turn and move in a different direction. The preparation John insists on is not straightening the roads but changing and straightening our lives.

Reflections

Some consider chapter 3 as the actual beginning of the Gospel itself with the first two chapters being the introduction. When considered in this way, Luke is doing more than giving us a precise timing and place for the beginning of John’s ministry. Luke is setting the scene for a clash of two kingdoms. The seven leaders named in the text were the heads of the worldly, politico-economic-religious power structure for that region. They represented the best of human civilization at that time and place – the best what humans had established out of God’s created order. This contrasts with the Kingdom of God which begins at the bottom (in human terms), with the Word of God coming to the son of an obscure priest in an obscure place. Wilderness is characterized by its remote proximity to human civilization. Yet it will be this Kingdom that will triumph over the oppressive power structures detailed by Luke. When we look at our world today through the lens of the worldly powers Luke described, what are the injustices that we are called to transform by living out and proclaiming the Gospel in our unique time and place? A word of caution is required. Humans have a track record of replacing one set of injustices with another. Where might this be happening today?

When we think about the metaphorical wilderness in our lives, how has God called and prepared us? “*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*” (Ephesians 2:10). What personal *metanoia* needs to occur in each of us to become more faithful and disciplined disciples that bear fruit for the Kingdom?

As we begin to prepare to celebrate Christmas in a society that is ever increasingly post-Christian and where Christmas has become bastardized as a secular commercial event, we have a choice to make. We must decide, both individually and as a group or church, whether we will be *active messengers* or merely *passive consumers* of Christmas. Are we willing to bring the true message of hope, peace, joy, and love to our world? Are we able to explain the message of Christmas? Before we can share the Good News, we must first *be* the Good News. Are we willing to live out the Gospel in our communities or is Christmas something we are preparing to “do” behind closed doors?

To complicate matters, this is the second Christmas we will celebrate under the shadow of COVID-19. Our preparation requires us to undertake new things and perhaps take on a new sense of urgency. The winds of massive social change are blowing as existing trends have become magnified by the pandemic. The response to the pandemic has also further revealed the deep fractures within our world. To where do we turn? To another list of temporary worldly leaders that have worldly authority but not the power to save? The pandemic has simply exposed the wilderness beneath the veneer of our society. Yet the wilderness is the place where we encounter God. The wilderness is the place where we are prepared for our respective ministries.

