

Behind the Pine Curtain
Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6
Second Sunday of Advent, (Dec. 8) 2024
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The first two verses of Luke 3 have long been a favorite of mine and I've talked about it in the pulpit for years: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler (tetrarch) of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler (tetrarch) of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, -- the word of God came to John son of Zechariah out in the wilderness."

Luke gives us an extensive list of the political and religious powers-that-be from far-off Rome, Tiberius Caesar, down to the tetrarch brothers – Herod and Philip (by the way: a tetrarch is literally "ruler of one fourth" meaning that each brother inherited one fourth of their father, Herod the Great's kingdom), and including the high priests Annas and Caiaphas.

But after the rollcall of the rich and powerful, Luke says, "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah out in the wilderness." John, the son of a country preacher, living way out in the wilderness is the recipient of the word of God.

Every year John the Baptist is the central figure of Advent. He is center stage for both the 2nd and 3rd Sundays of Advent. The truth is he is Advent. And while we tend to think of Advent as getting ready for Christmas, John has other ideas. John's message is indeed, "prepare" and "get ready" but this is no getting ready for a sweet little baby. John is a voice crying in the wilderness, "Repent!"

Have you ever noticed, there are no Christmas ornaments for John, and he does not have a place in our nativity scenes. John does not fit. I've occasionally thought if we did have a nativity figure for John, he would be standing outside the nativity, out on the edge of the table. John doesn't fit with the season. He's out of sync with our times, just like Advent is out of sync with our times. Which is why he is Advent.

John doesn't even live among regular folk. He doesn't live in a village, and he doesn't live in Jerusalem. He lives out in the wilderness, out in the desert. Off by himself, out in the middle of nowhere, off the grid, shouting and preaching and baptizing in the river.

You've also heard me say that whenever you read or hear certain words in the Bible, those words have a thickness of meaning. And in today's reading, the word "wilderness" is one of those words. Wilderness in the Bible is never just the wilderness. It evokes memories of Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years, relying on God alone for sustenance. Or Elijah in the wilderness running for his life from Queen Jezebel.

The wilderness is where Jesus feeds the 5000. The wilderness is where Jesus is tempted by Satan for forty days and forty nights. The wilderness is where in the book of Revelation the great confrontation with apocalyptic evil happens. And the wilderness is where the Desert Mothers and Desert Fathers lived as hermits beginning in the third and fourth centuries which eventually grew into monastic communities a century or two later.

The wilderness is the place where everything is stripped away, all securities, all routines, all comfort, everything that is familiar, all safety nets, all are gone, and the only thing left is you and the Living God.

When was growing up out north of Abilene in Stamford, my West Texas mother viewed East Texas as a vast, dark territory of Pine trees, mystery, and the unknown. On those rare occasions when we came to East Texas to visit my father's relatives, I got the feeling that my mother was not sure if we would make it out of the Pine forests. So, when Jane and I moved here in 1989, and first heard the term "behind the Pine Curtain," I had an idea of what it meant.

Tiberius Caesar was in Washington, and Pontus Pilate was in Austin, and the tetrarch brothers were in Houston and Dallas, while Annas and Caiaphas were the pastors of First Baptist Church Houston and First Baptist Church Dallas – yet the word of God came to John behind the Pine Curtain.

William Sloane Coffin used to say, "Those furthest from the seats of power are often nearer to the heart of things." And nearer to the heart of God. That was where John was – furthest from the seats of power so he could be nearer to the heart of God.

John is out of sync and out of place, out on the edge, out of time, and dressed in the clothing from the past while pointing to the future. He is pointing to God and to the future of God which is coming and coming soon!

The last book of the Old Testament is Malachi. Our reading this morning from chapter 3: *"Look! I'm sending my messenger on ahead to clear the way for me. Suddenly, out of the blue, the Leader you've been looking for will enter his Temple—yes, the Messenger of the Covenant, the one you've been waiting for. Look! He's on his way!" A Message from the mouth of God. But who will be able to stand up to that coming? Who can survive his appearance?* (Malachi 3:1-4).

Malachi goes on: *“Remember and keep the revelation I gave through my servant Moses, the revelation I commanded at Horeb for all Israel, all the rules and procedures for right living. ... But also look ahead. I’m sending Elijah the prophet to clear the way for the Big Day of God’s Salvation—the decisive Judgment Day!”* (Malachi 4:1-5).

And that’s it. That’s the end of the Old Testament. And all the people coming out to hear John know this scripture and they know that John is dressed in the same way as Elijah was dressed (see II Kings 1:8), and they also know that Elijah did not die but was taken to heaven directly on a chariot of fire, and it is why Jews have always remembered Passover with an empty chair awaiting the prophet Elijah’s return. It was believed that when Elijah returned, it would signal the end of the world, and the next One to show up would be the Messiah.

Malachi ends then there is 400 years of silence. Nothing. Not a word. 400 years of waiting and listening and watching. Then John the Baptist shows up in the wilderness dressed like Elijah and preaching like Elijah. The air around John is electric with possibility. People go out to hear him with the hair standing up on their arms. Is this Elijah? Is he the One?

John is standing as the climax of Old Testament prophetic faith. At the same time, with his call to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” he is using apocalyptic language which is not oriented toward the past but looks forward to the coming of the Messiah, not to the old ways of doing things but to the new kingdom of heaven that is coming.

So, when I say that John was out of sync and out of place and does not fit, again, it has little to do with his eccentricity and everything with him standing at the juncture between the Old and the New. He is the pivot where everything is

about to change. New Testament scholar Tom Long says, “All of human history swung on its hinges, the massive plates of cosmic time shifted under the surface, and the Day of God’s salvation was dawning” (*Matthew*, p. 25). Here is John embodying the old while pointing to the new. He is the hinge of history turning from the Old Way of Death and Domination to the New Creation, the kingdom of heaven as it comes incarnated in Christ.

God is up to something new, and the people are not sure what, but they hunger and thirst for a word from God. Is the Messiah coming? Is the promised deliverance coming?

And though John is behind the Pine Curtain, out in the sticks. Though he is in the middle of nowhere. Luke tells us that people are coming from everywhere to hear him, and then turning from their old ways and habits and being baptized. They are walking, riding, running, or whatever it takes to hear John. They’re leaving their comfort zones to get to the uncomfortable wilderness. They’re walking away from their routines and habits of convenience to join the inconvenient and the out of sync.

Because John is telling us that no matter how bad things feel. No matter what else is going on. God is on the move. Something is happening.

Austin Heights, here behind the Pine Curtain, we are entering a new chapter in our life together. We’re doing our homework so we can properly administer a house, a temporary home, for migrant families on a journey to new, safe places. We’re also working with the CBF exploring what “thriving congregations” look like, and how we can better prepare ourselves as we look to the future. Jan. 11-12 (Sat. and Sunday), we will host two consultants from the CBF Thriving Congregations Initiative for a weekend together. At the same time, after the first of

the year, I'm exploring how we might gather various out of sync, out of place, and out of church friends, neighbors, and acquaintances who simply need each other in these apocalyptic times of climate crisis, political turmoil, refugees, and fear.

John says, "Get ready! Get rid of everything that is an obstacle to us knowing God. Leave behind what gets in the way or weighs us down. Pay attention to what is needed for the journey in front of us. Pack light. Learn what is sustainable. Get your spiritual life in shape. We are called out of our old comfort zones. Come on! God is on the move.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.