

## The Second Sunday in Advent

Luke 3:1-20

No "Once-Upon-A-Time" Story

*"Once upon a time ..."* When I was a child, I heard many stories that began with those words. I soon learned that those words – *"Once upon a time ..."* – those words meant that whatever came next came out of someone's imagination. The story that followed was not real.

Today's Gospel from Luke begins in quite a different way. *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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* This is no *"Once upon a time"* bedtime story. Luke put in all these historical markers so that we would know that the accounts that follow these words are actual events in history. The thousands of years between then and now have blurred our picture and understanding of all these rulers, but for the original audience of Luke's Gospel, these rulers were real people that they remembered. These time markers would be just as real to them as if I were to start an account with the words: "During the third year of Stephen Harper's first term in office, when Alison Redford was Premier of Alberta and Stephen Mandel was mayor of Edmonton...." You see, these accounts are about real people in real times and in real places. Today's Gospel is about a real man named John who prepared the way for a real Savior named Jesus of Nazareth.

There is something else about all these names. Some of them are Gentiles. John's message of preparation is not just for Jews. It is also for the rest of the world.

John is an Old Testament prophet in his own right. Even though Jesus is already alive and will soon begin His own ministry, John still points forward to the Christ. He points forward to Jesus, the one who will come after him – the one whose sandals he is not worthy to untie.

John is a unique prophet in that older prophets had pointed forward **to him**. Luke quoted Isaiah's words about John in today's Gospel: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord...'" We read Malachi's words about John in the Old Testament reading assigned to this day: "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me...". There are others as well. The Holy Spirit inspired these writers to tell us that John's message is important. John's message is real. It is important. It is for us.

John's message begins with some very heavy handed and offensive law: *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"* This is pretty gritty stuff. John points back to Genesis 3 where the devil came to Eve as a serpent. He is calling us sons and daughters of Satan. He is telling us that we are all conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil. He is telling us that we would be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation.

This is not a politically correct message. This is not a "Why can't we all just get along" message. This is not a "Well, let's just agree to disagree" message. This is an aggressive, in-your-face, offensive message.

And just in case you believe that this message does not apply to you. Listen to the words John has for those who thought **they** were exempt from his message: *"Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham."* If even the descendants of Abraham, God's chosen people, were not exempt from this message, then we don't stand a chance. Do not begin to think that these words are not for you. Do not even begin to make excuses for yourself. I was born a child of Satan and so were you.

And if that were not enough, John proceeded to draw a word picture that describes the penalty we face for being children of Satan: *"Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."* Eternal fire waits for those who are children of Satan. Eternal fire waits for us unless someone delivers us from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation.

Then, just to make sure you got the point, John told another parable to reinforce the first. This time the word picture uses the image of a threshing floor: *"His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."* So much for the idea that pastors should not tell people that the penalty for rejecting God is everlasting death – unquenchable fire.

This is not a very pleasant message and it is not supposed to be. John is doing what every faithful pastor should do. He is pointing out our standing before God according to the law. He is bringing his hearers to the terrors that strike the conscience through the knowledge of sin. The faithful pastor applies the law until his hearers feel absolutely wretched over their sin. That is the purpose of the law.

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What, in turn, is the purpose for this terror that comes with the knowledge of sin? Why is this terrifying message good for us?

People who are expert problem solvers tell us that the first step toward any solution is an accurate description of the problem. Sin is an accurate one word description of our problem. So, although people don't like to hear about sin and its punishment, faithful prophets warned about sin in the past and faithful pastors continue to warn of sin in the present. Neither prophets nor pastors enjoy telling people of their sin, but it is a necessary first step toward a solution to sin – a first step toward our salvation.

John applied the full power of the law, but the law was not all there was to John's message. John did not just proclaim the law, but he also proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Luther tells us that repentance has two parts. One part is contrition, that is, terrors striking the conscience through the knowledge of sin. John has nailed that part. Now it is time for the other part. The other part is faith, which is born of the Gospel – a faith that believes that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven.

As John terrified people with the law, he also comforted them with the forgiveness born of the Gospel. The Savior will soon arrive. "He is mightier than I", John said. I am not worthy to untie His sandal straps. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

This mighty Savior is no one other than Jesus Christ. He is the one whom the prophets proclaimed and He is the one in whom they believed. This mighty Savior is the solution to our problem of sin. He is the one who earned forgiveness for our sins and offers that forgiveness to us for free. He is the one who makes us holy in God's sight.

How did He do this? As mighty as Jesus is, He demonstrated His might in weakness. Even though we are not worthy to touch His feet, He allowed mere men to nail Him to a cross. It was from the apparent weakness of that cross that Jesus demonstrated His greatest might. In the apparent defeat of death, Christ conquered death. He became the solution for sin by taking our sin onto Himself and paying the price for it. It is only through Him that we receive the forgiveness of sins.

God sent John to prepare the way for the Lord. John did this by making people intensely aware of their sins. God prepares people for their Savior by making them intensely aware of their need for salvation. The more we understand our sin, the more we appreciate our savior.

The deeper we grieve over sin, the more we rejoice over our salvation. As hard as it is to examine ourselves in the light of God's commands, it is the way we prepare for the coming of the Lord.

John the Baptizer was indeed a great prophet of God. Nevertheless, the one who followed him was even greater; for the one who followed him is God in flesh and blood. He is the one who took our sins to the cross and exchanged them for His righteousness as He shed His precious blood for us and died to pay for our sins. He is the one who baptizes us with the Spirit when water is combined with Word. He is the one who works through the Spirit to give us the faith that believes. It is His coming that marks the season of Advent as we remember how He came long ago, in manger and cross, how He will come again in future clouds of Glory, and how He comes today in Word and Sacrament.

May this season prepare us so that when Jesus says, <sup>[Revelation 22:20]</sup> *"Surely I am coming soon,"* we can join God's people and reply, *"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"* In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen