

Advent 2 (C)

Lk 3.1-6

Pay very close attention to today's gospel, because there's an important and sometimes overlooked lesson lurking at the heart of this little section from Luke. This gospel shows us how God works in the world, and in so doing shows us how God often works in our lives.

In other words, this gospel isn't only about something that happened two thousand years ago; it's about something that's happening right now, something that's happening in your life and in the life we share as members of this particular community of faith.

Just so there's no confusion or uncertainty, I'm going to cut right to the chase: what this passage from Luke's gospel shows us is that God goes about the work of salvation in ways we often won't recognize.

It's not insignificant that Luke begins his account of the ministry of John the Baptist by telling us about a number of important and powerful people. The emperor Tiberius, off ruling the known world from Rome. Pilate and Lysanias, enforcing Roman justice in Palestine. Herod Antipas and his brother Philip, each lording it over a small piece of what was left of their father's kingdom and serving as willing pawns in the Roman occupation of Israel. Annas and Caiaphas, a high priest and his son-in-law overseeing the work and the worship of the most important place in all of Israel, the temple. All big, important people, doing big, important things.

And when God decides to act, which of these big, important people does he go to? Which center of political, economic, military, or religious power does he choose as the place to begin his work? God goes to a solitary figure living on the fringes of society in the middle of nowhere.

Why was John out there in the wilderness? We simply take it for granted that's where he belongs, but *why* was he there? He didn't start in the wilderness. He came from a very respectable family; both his parents were members of the house of Aaron. His father belonged to a priestly order that went back for centuries.

Even more to the point, John's father had been told John would be the one who would turn many in Israel back to God: John would go forth with the spirit and the power of Elijah, he would a prophet unlike any that had been seen in Israel for hundreds of years. Expectations were high when John was born: Luke tells us everyone throughout the hill country of Judea had heard about John's birth, and everyone was asking the question, "What is this child going to become?"

As a side note, this gives us a rather interesting contrast with the birth of Jesus: when Jesus is born, nobody knows who he is and nobody's wondering who he might become.

Not so with John: everybody expects great things of this young man. And yet, where do we find John? In the temple, serving where his father had faithfully served before him? In Jerusalem? Is he anywhere near a center of power or influence, is he in any way associated with the big and important people of the world? We find John in the wilderness, and that is where he meets God.

Now, the lesson here is fairly obvious, but it bears repeating because we tend to forget—in fact, we often try our best to forget: God goes about the work of salvation in ways we often won't recognize. God called John, and God calls us...and, like John, we will usually find that we need to go to the wilderness to hear the word God has for us.

Oftentimes we look for God in what we think of as the important places, both in the world and in our lives. We want to see God moving in the corridors of power, we want to see

God shaking things up in ways that will attract attention and leave no doubt as to who's in charge.

Sometimes we want this for the right reason: we want to see God given his proper due, we want to see the world made right. But as often as not we want this for the wrong reason: we want to see someone else taken down, or we want to see ourselves vindicated.

But regardless of whether we want it for the wrong reasons or even the right reasons, this does not seem to be the way God works. God goes to work in the wilderness, the place where nobody's paying attention, the place where nobody thinks anything ever happens, the place where power and influence are not much in evidence.

Thomas Merton, the Cistercian monk, once wrote that the wilderness is the place that is "supremely valuable in the eyes of God precisely because it has no value to [human beings]. The [wilderness is the place] that can never be wasted by humans because it offers [them] nothing." There's nothing to attract us in the wilderness. There's nothing to exploit in the wilderness. "The [wilderness] is created simply to be itself," says Merton, "not to be transformed by [us] into something else. . . . The [wilderness] is therefore the logical dwelling place for the [those] who [seek] to be nothing but [themselves]—that is to say, [creatures] solitary and poor and dependent on no one but God."

Solitary, poor, dependent on no one but God: that's a pretty good description of John. And yet, this is the one who is entrusted with the message that God is coming; this is the one destined to prepare the way of the Lord, and to turn the hearts of many in Israel back to God. This is how God goes to work.

A few minutes ago I said this story is not only about something that happened a long time ago but is also about something happening right now, in your life and in our life as community of faith. This is the real meaning of the season of Advent. Advent is not just about looking back and remembering, it's also about looking forward in anticipation, and it's hard to anticipate something that's already happened.

So when we hear the words, "Prepare the way of the Lord," we should expect that those words have as much to do with the coming of the Lord in our lives today as they did with the coming of Jesus in the first century. We're taught that Advent is about preparing for the coming of Jesus at Christmas, but if that's all Advent is about then it's not much help to us: we already know the end of the Christmas story.

But if Advent is about something else as well—if it's about the coming of the Lord into the world *today*—then we're not just remembering, we're expecting, we're anticipating, we're looking forward in faith and hope, and longing to see the fulfillment of God's promise and the appearance of his salvation.

Now, here's where the rubber hits the road. Where would you like to see God at work in the world today? Would you like to see God show up in the important places of the world? Do we want to see God moving through the corridors of power, sweeping everything before him and shaking things up? Are we hoping God is going to move in a way that leaves no doubt as to who's in charge?

Apply that same question to your own life: where would you like to see God at work in you? Are you hoping he might do something about that problem you're convinced is so tremendously important and so terribly difficult that you can't seem to do anything about it? Or, on the other hand, are you perhaps expecting God is not likely to do much of anything in your life, or in the world?

While all the big, important people are off doing their big, important things in the centers

of power and influence, God moves in the wilderness. God shows up at a time when no one expects him, and he appears in a place where no one is looking for him. God's word goes forth in silence and in obscurity.

What's true about the way God works in the world is also often true about the way God works in our lives. While we're busy obsessing about something we're convinced is a huge problem, God's diligently working away in some other area of our lives. While we're straining with everything we've got to try and hear even a whisper of God's voice, he's often shouting at us at the top of his lungs about something we're not ready to hear. At a time we don't expect, and in places where we may not be looking, God shows up and the real work of redemption begins.

Advent is as much about today as it is about yesterday. So hear again these words from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and hear them not as a promise of something that's *already* happened but as a promise of something that is *going* to happen. Hear them as a promise for our world today, and hear them as a promise to you.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill shall be made low ... the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; [for] all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” God is coming, he is doing a new work, and we need to be ready.

Like John, we are called to proclaim this message. Like John, the word of God has come to us in the wilderness of this time and this place—the wasteland of today's world—and has charged us to bear witness to the work God is doing. The message of Advent is that God is on the move, at work in the world, and that the whole world will see the salvation of God. This is not just about what God has done; it's about what God is doing, and what God will do.

May we prepare the way of the Lord in our lives and make straight the path to our hearts, our minds, and our lives, so that when he comes he finds us ready to receive him, ready to bear witness to the salvation of God that he gives to us and to the whole world. Amen.

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