

## **Advent 2. Luke 3:1-6. December 9, 2018.**

Advent is my favorite liturgical season, because it asks so much of us. No, it doesn't quite call us to the ascetical heights or pits of Lent, but no season in the church so strongly pulls us out of the culture's undertow of frenetic sleepwalking toward nothingness. The prominent themes shift each week: from last week's apocalypse, to the John the Baptist doublet of this and next week, to the almost Christmas of Advent 4. But the season never ceases to be about three things: that Christ has come to us, Christ still comes to us, and Christ will come to us again. It asks us to do things that are profoundly anti-consumerist and maybe even downright un-American: to wait, to watch, to prepare our own hearts and the world for an indefinitely timed arrival.

If you grew up a fire and brimstone fundamentalist like I did, then you may find yourself drawn to that last coming, the Christ will come again that somehow ends and rebirths the world. If you grew up in the Episcopal Church or one of its closer denominational cousins, then there's every chance that despite our frequent prayers, you find that thought rather embarrassing and suspect that I may have just committed a social faux pas. Let's have a god without the supernaturalism, please. I'm joking, but quite a few of us might prefer a god who would stay up in heaven and more or less leave us alone. And when we feel like this our preparations are likely to focus on the coming at Christmas (safely in the past), and we are preparing to remember. Or perhaps you do find a way to focus on the ways that Christ still comes to us—the ways that Christ and his kingdom come every time we break bread together, every time the bereaved are comforted, the poor given justice, the wicked dethroned but shown mercy.

I think this is both the hardest advent to prepare for and the most urgent one, at least for us fairly comfortable folks who have little reason to long for the end of the world. To watch and prepare for the ways that Christ comes to us day in and day out, in the midst of our mundane distracted lives. What does it look like, really, to watch for Christ on the blue line, in line at the grocery store, in the elevator at work? And how on earth can we prepare for his coming without bands of angels singing and trumpets blaring and stars a-blazing to show the way?

Until we are all much better at prayer than we are, I don't think it's going to become easy to stay alert for the ways Christ comes to us daily, usually in an inconvenient fashion. But today's gospel can help us stay alert and to know what to look for. However we read the beginning of this gospel passage, we're going to struggle. Our eyes glaze over, our fingers slip, our ears succumb to a low river lulling of syllables. Usually, the most interesting aspect of this ancient power ranking is to hear how the deacon will decide to pronounce all those names and places.

But I would like to draw your attention to this very boring part because it can tell us something important. We won't try to pick apart this list of emperors and governors and priests for hidden meanings. I just want us to notice that Luke goes into such

excruciating detail about the mundane historical nitty-gritty when he's getting ready to introduce John the Baptist. The specificity is important not to establish Luke's historian credentials, but to remind us that God tends to work through specificity. Individual people in normal real circumstances, going about their historical lives in specific towns or wildernesses are the material with which God saves the world. It is because Christ has come in the specific time and place of Galilee under Herod's and Tiberius' rule that we can expect him to come in the specific times and places we inhabit. The normal, boring, unwelcoming specifics of our lives are precisely the kind of place that Jesus, the Word of God, is prone to come. Whatever the specifics of your life or our life together, they are a context to which Christ is coming and from which God wants to work to remake the world.

In the less boring part of this passage, Luke sets John's mission by quoting Isaiah. John is the forerunner of Jesus, sent to prepare the way. And preparing the way looks like a great equalizing: raising up valleys and knocking down mountains, straightening and smoothing rough crooked pathways. It is work that is destructive before it is creative, or contains difficulty and pain within its redemption. I'm sure that we will always be surprised when we recognize that Christ has come, but the way to prepare for him in our specific place, too, is to raise up the lowly and dis-exalt the powerful. To do our best to straighten out what is crooked and to smooth what is rough, especially for the benefit of the poor.

If Christ is coming to us where we happen to be, then where we happen to be is also where we start our preparations. We start on the sidewalk we're walking on, the elevator we're in, the train car we're riding, the high school we or our kids attend. But this isn't a matter of wearing blinders and caring little for the wider world. Our gospel passage ends with the greatest universalism: "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." God's salvation of the whole benighted blessed world starts small. It starts with Christ coming even to people like us, in situations like ours. Amen.