

ADVENT II**ChCh-St. Luke's****9 December 2018**

Baruch 5:1-9

Philippians 1:1-11

Luke 3:1-6

Reflection

“All flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:1-6). Well, that depends.ⁱ

It depends on where you are from. It depends on your country of origin. It depends on your religion. It depends on with whom you are associated. It depends on your race, your ethnicity, your gender, your sexual orientation. The list of criteria for salvation, contrived predominantly from our many fears, is long according to the world (and the Church) as we know it today, but not according to the Gospel of Luke. And since Luke is providing a particular portrait of Jesus, not according to Jesus either.

This passage from Luke for the Second Sunday of Advent points to competing world views. As commentator Karoline Lewis states, the opening verses are deceptively subversive. Into the religious reigns and imperial kingdoms of the first century C.E., the word of God comes.

Luke begins by situating the time period in which Jesus lived, starting with the most powerful, Emperor Tiberius, and then names different local and religious figures. Yet it is not until the end of the list, that God speaks. It is not the proponent of the military industrial complex, Tiberius who expanded the Roman Empire with force, nor Pontius Pilate who was the State head of Rome in Judea. It is not the Jewish Political leader, Herod, who was more concerned with his own politics than practicing the Jewish faith. Nor is it those who lived as high priests.

The following inscription on an ancient stone found in Palestine in 1961 demonstrates how these political leaders saw themselves:

“To the Divine Augustus Tiberius
Pontius Pilate -prefect of Judea -
has dedicated”

This stone is important for many reasons. First, it is the only archaeological evidence for Pontius Pilate. Second, it gives us a glance into how the powers-that-be viewed themselves in this era. To be powerful meant to be divine.

Yet, God chooses to speak through a wild man known as John the Baptizer who dressed in animal skins, ate wild honey, and probably had the most unruly hair! (So quips political theologian, Timothy Wotringⁱⁱ) The biblical description of the Baptizer's dress and style resembled the prophet Elijah found early in Second Kings. Why then do we ignore God's trend of speaking through those who diverge from the status quo?

Advent is a time to be open, to learn patience and to wait for Jesus. We are waiting for the celebration of Jesus' birth – Emmanuel - as well as for Jesus' coming in our time, however we interpret that. This reading compels us to reflect on whom we listen to in our society. Are we only listening to those with all the power? Are we seeking relationships with those with no social and economic advantages? Our waiting goes in vain if we are not also seeking out different voices to challenge how we are conducting our own lives. (The people of Paris will relate to this). Our waiting goes in vain if we fail to see ourselves in the different 'other'.

I've recently watched a British TV series called 'Broken' which features a seemingly impotent Roman Catholic priest, Fr Michael Kerrigan, (played by Sean Bean) who ministers in a poverty-stricken area of northern England. A community confronted with mental illness, suicide, gambling addiction, bereavement & grief, sexual abuse in the church, homophobia, racism – their victims are all woven into this harrowing, heart-breaking and finally hopeful series. But mainly, it's a 6-episode story about the triumph of the prophetic voice – in particular, the voice of 'Helen', a black woman grieving the wrongful police-killing of her mentally ill, only son, a voice daring to speak truth into brokenness, defying oppression and corruption. And it's also a story about the power of authentic, vulnerable community, gathered, nurtured and strengthened at the Lord's table.

Advent is a perfect time to deepen our commitment to the ongoing journey of transformation in this season of waiting. As John proclaims, it is a season of metanoia: the “change of mind” that takes our focus away from the clamouring voices at the centres of power and invites us to gaze contemplatively and deeply at creation and the Creator.

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness...”

It doesn't take much effort to imagine our world as a wilderness. Scarcity, isolation, hunger, and violence seem to rule the day. Even here in Aotearoa, New Zealand, reports of increasing need for food parcels reach our ears and hearts this Advent.....and reports of murder are not unusual. The pain and injustice around us can make us wonder whether God is at work in this wilderness. But Luke suggests that the wilderness is precisely where God provides what we need, so that we can now be the ones “crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’”

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

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' (Luke 3:1-6)

Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Annas, and Caiaphas, (you might like to replace those names with contemporary leaders) will have to tend with the rule of the word of God, a rule that insists on salvation for all.

It is no accident that John the Baptist, whose birth to Elizabeth, old and barren, narrated in the first chapter of Luke, quotes Isaiah, and Jesus will do the same in his sermon in

Nazareth. Isaiah was God's word to those exiled in Babylon, separated from life as they knew it because it was separation from the God of life.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s paraphrase of Luke 3:6 (from Isaiah 40:4) testifies to the power of God's word to bring salvation to all.

"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together." King's paraphrase "All flesh shall see it together," acknowledges the communal commitment to justice.

The inclusiveness of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke means that we will see the most unlikely of characters, including ourselves, have a central role in bringing about the Kingdom of God. This is John's message. Preparing the way is seeing salvation together and together seeing that salvation can be for all. To prepare the way of the Lord is to see those the world overlooks. To prepare the way of the Lord is to join together to make straight the paths of the crooked that seem to rule our world.

To prepare the way of the Lord is to see how we might make possible salvation here and now as that which means a return to the living for all.

Because together, it is indeed possible that all flesh might know life.

Advent teaches us that the divine does not whisper through the powers-that-be, but through the lowly, the downtrodden, the outcast. Yet we are quite skilled in qualifying God's love.

May Advent be a time of struggle to wait for a just world, while living for justice through the expectations set by the down-trodden.

And as we embody the Word we hear proclaimed there, John's proclamation that "all flesh will see the salvation of God" (Luke 3.6) will be fulfilled.

Let us pray:

O Lord,

Your prophets of old proclaimed with courage and conviction

- even in the midst of oppression and persecution -

the promise and power of Your love and tender mercies.

Help us O God, to hear your prophetic voices today -

in surprising places and unlikely people.

Speak your light into our darkness,

make low the mountains and hills of our consumer-worship,

fill our contaminated and weeping valleys,

straighten our crooked paths of discrimination

make smooth our rough and violent actions

toward ourselves and others

prepare in our hearts, ways of right relationship,

with You and all Your creation.

Today – as of old – call us from our wilderness

to metanoia -

to be people of reconciliation, humility and hope,

ready to welcome once again, the Christ in our midst.

Amen.

Helen Roud

ⁱ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/karoline-m-lewis/selective-salvation-in-a-fear-filled-world-luke-31-6_b_8702218.html

ⁱⁱ <https://politicaltheology.com/wild-listening-politics-scripture-luke-31-6/>