

A TENDER WORD FOR STORMY TIMES

Advent 2: Get ready!

Luke 3:1-6; Luke 1:68-79; Baruch 5:1-9

How often, reading the Bible,
have we come across a bunch of names,
mostly unpronounceable,
and thought . . . “*Well*, this is quaint.”

It’s an old, archaic way of marking time.
Instead of saying, “In the fall of 1987 . . .” like we do,
the Bible says things like,
“In the third year of the reign of King Artaxerxes,
when Gedaliah son of Ahikam was governor . . .”
And sometimes the names go on and on and on.
It’s tempting just to skip over them,
and get to the part that really means something.

Maybe that’s what you thought when you heard those seven names
in the first two verses of our Gospel reading.
Well, I intend to help you think differently about that today.
Those names do a lot more than give the story a dateline,
although they *do* that.
The writer of Luke was certainly interested in details
like names and dates.
But the list of names in Luke 3 hold a deeper meaning.
They help the Gospel writer declare a profound truth
about the way God works in the world.

These are the names of all the people who,
in the time of Jesus,
were getting in the way of God.
They were actively hindering
the fulfillment of God’s purposes for his people
and for the whole world.

But to understand *how* they were doing that,
you need the bigger picture that the Bible gives us,
about the way God works in this world,

and for what purpose.

From all biblical evidence, both Old and New Testaments,
it seems God’s way of working in the world
is to befriend a particular people,
and make them his missionary people to the world.

God calls a people into being,
asks them to follow his way,
and structure their life as a people
in a way that honors God’s priorities
of love and justice and peace,
and care for the vulnerable ones among them.
And God calls these people to fashion a society based on those values,
at sharp odds with the values of the nations of the world.

Then this community of people
are to demonstrate God’s will and God’s reign in a winsome way,
so that all the other peoples and nations of the earth will be blessed,
will prosper,
will live in harmony with each other,
and will turn toward God.
Then God will act to save and redeem the world,
and restore the shalom, the peace and the wholeness
that God created in the beginning.
So God’s *modus operandi* in the Bible,
is calling out people to work together with God to heal the earth.

And it was the children of Abraham,
living in Palestine,
who were God’s designated people.

But, here in Palestine around A.D. 30 or so,
this people of God were in trouble.
They were political refugees in their own land.
They were being brutally oppressed by a foreign power
that had no appreciation for their God,
or for God’s purposes in the world.

As a result, God's people *themselves* were getting off-track spiritually.
They had forgotten their divine calling
to demonstrate love and justice.
Many lived in despair.

That is the context in which we hear these names.
The names listed there are *precisely* the ones
who are brutally oppressing God's people,
or . . . leading them down a path of spiritual confusion.

So what Luke is basically saying here in these opening verses, is . . .

In the fifteenth year of the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius . . .
when Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor *in* Jerusalem . . .
during the reign of the brutal King Herod in Galilee . . .
while Herod's brother Philip and another king, Lysanias,
ruled all the surrounding regions . . . *and*
during the time that Annas and Caiaphas
were high priests for the Jewish people,
during this spiritually confusing and conflicted time . . .
the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Literally, while all hell was breaking loose in their homeland,
while they were being over-taxed and under-served,
while those who dared to resist were publicly executed
on crosses that dotted the landscape,
while their own spiritual leaders were desperately trying to survive
by acquiescing to Rome,
that's *precisely the time* when God acted to intervene
with the good news of hope and of salvation.
And the news was delivered by none other than
a wild-haired, locust-eating, shrill-voiced prophet,
born to a couple in their senior years.

This was, to put it *mildly*, an unlikely and amazing development
in the lives of the Jewish people of Palestine.

While all the powers that be were sitting in their seats of power,

trying to control the destiny of these Jewish people in Palestine,
the word of God came to some wild character out in the desert.

There were plenty of other voices during that time,
in the towns and cities of Palestine,
who claimed to be hearing the word of God
who tried sway Jewish public opinion
that *their* way was the *best* way
of getting Israel out of this mess.

The zealots were revolutionaries
who tried to convince the people
that the way out was armed rebellion.

The religious rulers tried to convince the people
that the way out was becoming religiously pure.
"If we only follow all God's commands completely,
as soon as we reach spiritual perfection
and make God happy again,
the Messiah will come and set us free."

And while those voices were trying to get the upper hand,
this hairy prophet in the desert showed up with a simple message.
Repent, and your sins will be forgiven
and salvation will come.

That was John's message—
a message to the lost people of God.
Repent, my people. Repent.
But this is not the kind of repentance
that we modern Western Christians like to think of.
This is not me, *individually*, being remorseful, regretful,
being emotionally convicted of my personal sin.
That might *happen*,
as a result of hearing this message to the community.
I might feel sorrow and regret,
for particular ways I've been disobedient to the covenant.
And that sorrow *might*, hopefully,
bring me to confession and repentance.
But repentance is *not* sorrow.

Repentance is *not* remorse.
Repentance is change.
Literally, to repent means to change our way of thinking.
If you break down the Greek word, *metanoia*,
that's *exactly* what it means.
To think again. To change our mind about something.

Or, in the case of calling a whole community to repent,
like John the Baptist was doing,
I think the best way to put it in plain English is this:
“People of God, change your old ways of thinking.
Think rightly about who you are, about who God is,
and about how you are called to live in this world.”
Repent. Think *again*.
And your sins will be forgiven—as a people
and as individuals.

Considering the community John was preaching to,
that message is certainly appropriate.
The people had gotten lazy in their thinking.
They failed to see what the Roman domination
was doing to them as a community of faith.
They were losing their story as God's covenant people.
They were failing to think of themselves rightly,
in relation to this powerful Roman Empire,
whose pagan culture was taking over the world.
Some of them were getting caught up in the political struggle.
Some were in active conflict with each other
over this or that bit of religious trivia.
But their major failing was that they no longer
thought of themselves as God's own people.
And it affected how they lived.

And the good news of John the Baptist's message is,
as they make a turn in their thinking,
God will come to save.
If they but change this narrow, self-centered way of thinking
about themselves,
and about God,

and about the world around them,
it will open their physical and spiritual senses to God
in a whole new way.
They will be able to encounter
the saving presence and power and grace of God.

In the *midst* of the storm, God tender word comes—
while Emperor Tiberius is on the throne,
during King Herod's brutal reign.
They need not conspire to force God's hand.
They need not take up arms
and mastermind their own freedom.
They need not earn God's favor
by reaching some level of perfection.
They need only change their way of thinking,
and turn toward God.
And God's tender mercy will take it from there.

The salvation of our God
that comes to us in the midst of our deepest struggle,
is a gift of pure grace.
It is God's doing.
And God's doing *alone*.
But it is our turning, our repenting,
our deliberate willingness to think anew,
to change our minds and hearts,
that opens the gate to let God's grace *in*.
And God's work of saving grace among us,
is what empowers us to live differently.

I wonder if John the Baptist's message would be much different
if he came along preaching to the church today.
Don't we as the people of God today,
also have some work to do,
in terms of thinking differently about who we are as a people,
and who God is,
and how God calls us to live, as a people.

I wonder if John wouldn't also call *us*, as a community of faith,
to be a repentant community.

If he wouldn't ask us, as a church, to turn in our thinking,
to think again,
to examine our thought framework,
in other words, to think *Christian-ly*.

Our thought framework shapes how we act as a church.

How we organize ourselves.
How we make decisions.
How we distribute financial resources.
How we plan worship.
How we do outreach.

Our thought framework shapes how I act personally.

Thinking, as a part of God's people,
has an impact on my behavior.

On my television viewing habits,
the kind of Christmas presents I give,
the kind of house I buy or build,
the car I drive,
the food I eat,
the books and magazines I read,
my use of the internet,
and nearly every other choice I make.

Thinking Christianly, as a member of the people of God,
makes a huge difference.

It doesn't come easy, though.

Thinking Christianly
requires careful and diligent work of discernment.

It takes a community of faith willing to engage in this hard work.
The work is hard, but the grace is plentiful.

And that grace is what makes this call to repentance,
not a heavy, burdensome call, but a tender word,
a word of sweet salvation.

As earlier, we chanted the words of Zechariah's song in Luke 1:

"By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

It is God's tender, saving, grace-filled action toward us
that makes *any* of this possible.

It is God who calls.
It is God who saves.
It is God who transforms us.
It is God who enables us to live and think rightly.

What we are responsible for is *the turn*.

The deliberate willingness to change course.
To let *our* truth be subject to *God's* truth.

Once the turn is made,

we have done what John the Baptist asked.
We have prepared the way of the Lord.

God will come and God will act.
The whole landscape will be changed.
The mountains made low, the valleys filled,
the rough places made smooth.

Not *by* us. But by the one who created the landscape.

Remember the words we heard from the Apocrypha?
From Baruch chapter 5.

Not a regular part of our Bible,
but a wonderful echo of the words of the Gospel.

Where John the Baptist, quoting Isaiah,
talked about the way being made level
for the coming of God,
Baruch puts an interest twist on the image.

There it says,

"For God has ordered that every high mountain
and the everlasting hills be made low
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God."

Here, God is changing the landscape, that *we* may walk safely.

Just a reminder that salvation is God's initiative,
and God's work.

We are called to repent, to turn in our way of thinking,
and walk the path laid out for us by our creator God.

And may we, by God's abundant and amazing grace,
be given courage and strength to walk this path.

—*Phil Kniss, December 6, 2009*