



Frankly... I Prefer the Baby – Touchpoint for December 1, 2021

Luke 3:1-6 (NRSV) *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘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.””

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

It is a strange place to begin, isn't it? One would think that if you are going to start with the story of God becoming human you would start with God. But not Luke. He starts with the human situation, the human condition. He starts with the macro view of the emperor and brings it down to the local high priest. It's a strange place to begin, isn't it?

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip blah, blah, blah...

It is a time of peace and prosperity. Everything is under control, tame and civil...*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius...*

Our Advent story starts out appealing to all that is tamed, civil, and comfortable in us. Yet, here in the midst of the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace—when the world was thought to be at its most peaceful point—another point of view is heard. It is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. It is a voice saying things will change. It's a voice saying things are not as good as they seem.

Tiberius may be emperor, Pilate may be governor, things may seem good, but there is a hurt, a hunger that is not being addressed but dressed over. Tiberius, Herod, Pilate and the like claim to have authority over the people's lives, but there is another authority that needs to be considered.

Marcus Borg explains it well:

“In Luke’s birth story, the key to seeing its political meaning is Roman imperial theology, which includes the divine conception of Caesar Augustus, the greatest of the Roman emperors and ruler when Jesus was born. He was conceived by the god Apollo in the womb of his mother Atia. His titles included “Son of God,” “Lord,”

“Savior,” bringer of “peace on earth.” Inscribed on coins and temples, the public media of the day, they continued to be used by most emperors after Augustus.

Thus there was already a “Son of God,” “Lord,” and peace-bringing “Savior” in the world in which Jesus lived and in which early Christianity emerged. Roman imperial theology is the historical context for understanding the use of this language.

Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth is a primary example. It deliberately counters and challenges Roman imperial theology. It includes divine conception, and thus Jesus, not Caesar, is the “Son of God.” Mary’s song—the Magnificat—proclaims that the powerful will be brought down from their thrones, the lowly lifted up, the hungry filled, and the rich sent away empty (Luke 1:46-55). It climaxes with the message of the angel to shepherds: to them was born a savior, the Lord, who would bring peace on earth. But by a very different means—not through the power and domination of empire, not through the lords of this world, but through the way that Jesus was proclaimed and embodied. Early Christians saw in Jesus the alternative to an imperial world based on injustice and violence.”

This text, this season we call Advent, calls us to confront these issues and, frankly...I prefer the baby.

Advent does not begin in buoyancy, celebration or in a shopping spree. The natural habitat of Advent is with a world that is hurting because this is the world into which the Mystery is going to come. These are the people with whom the Mystery is going to make its home.

*“I was hungry and you fed **ME**... I was sick and you visited **ME**.”*

Advent, along with John the Baptist, is the voice of those who struggle with the frustration and pains of everyday life. It is the voice of those who cannot dress over the darkness and pain of their lives by putting up a string of lights and wrapping a few gifts.

Advent is the voice of those who hear loudly and clearly the competing claims of authority who want ownership of their lives.

Advent begins in the heart of anyone who has heard that voice inside them crying out that something is amiss. Wherever other people, institutions or powers...tug, pull or claim authority over our lives...there lies the beginning of Advent. Whenever we are blinded by who we are and whose we are...there Advent is waiting to happen.

Advent begins in the voice that calls for change in what is amiss... not only out there in the world, but in here, in my heart and life, which is why, frankly...I prefer the baby.

John stands on the banks of the Jordan River outside of safe and civil Jerusalem. His message is that the Mystery is coming to reclaim ALL people. To those who have refused to be assimilated by Roman rule, to those who know something is amiss, the Baptizer's message comes as a word of hope and promise.

To those who have become comfortable and cozy with the authorities, the status quo, the ways of the world, John's words come as a threat. Because you see, when you are so heavily invested in the ways of the world, and profit from them, change is not good.

John stands as an outsider. His life and words rain down questions for our lives. Who claims us? Who owns us? Who or what rules our lives? Is that something we are ready to contemplate this Advent season? Is that something we are ready to prepare for? Frankly...I prefer the baby.

Through his words and actions, John shatters our world of conflicting authorities and loyalties. “You are about to be reclaimed,” he says. “The Mystery who formed you, made you and called you by name is coming to claim you again.”

The message comes hard. It sets heavy on our hearts and minds as it exposes the ways in which we have

sold out. It sits in the quietness of our souls. It silences all the competing and conflicting authorities of our lives. And we are forced to reflect upon who we are and whose we are. And frankly ...I prefer the baby.

Yet, in the silence, a strange and unexpected sound is heard. It is like the creaking of a rusty hinge, like a fire being started from small kindling, or a car trying to turn over on a winter morning. It starts out low and small and ends up loud and cataclysmic. What is it? It is the sound of our world being turned upside down. It is the sound of our lives being turned inside out. It is the sound of the Mystery reclaiming us.

It is the sound of God, not sending a baby, but a bulldozer to level whatever stands in the way of us and the Mystery. The Mystery is coming to straighten things out. To fill in the potholes of our lives and level the speedbumps, to smooth not only the rough edges of our lives but our entire lives.

*“...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;”*

It is the sound of God, not sending a baby, but a bulldozer to level whatever stands in the way of us and the Mystery. If that terrifies us...perhaps it should. The love of God is a jealous love. God has no desire to share us with anybody or anything.

John rightly proclaims God's passionate love in untamed words. No wonder we are uncomfortable. We're civilized. We're tamed. And perhaps we have tamed our God as well, worked to make the Mystery sensible, acceptable and palatable. Christianity has become safe, a good deal. That is how Tiberius' successor 300 years later, Constantine, would want it. And how every leader since has wanted it as well.

Our Advent season starts out appealing to all that is tamed, civil, and comfortable in us.

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...”

Everything is under control, tame and civil, but then these words...

“THE WORD OF GOD CAME...”

This is what we pray for this Advent: that the word of God will come to us. That it will not only shake up the tame and civil and comfortable part of our lives, but bring about a death and resurrection.

As Marcus Borg once wrote, “The dominant values of American life—affluence, achievement, appearance, power, competition, individualism—are vastly different from anything recognizable as the Christ. As individuals and as a culture...our existence has become massively idolatrous.”

This is what we pray for this Advent: that the word of God will come to us. That it will not only shake up the tame and civil and comfortable part of our lives, but bring about a death and resurrection.

And frankly, I prefer the baby.

Which is why I constantly deny, betray and run away from the Christ. Does that sound like anyone you know? And yet, even in my denial, betrayal and taking flight, “THE WORD OF GOD COMES,” the Christ comes to me in my denial and betrayal, and like a good shepherd pursues me in my flight away from him.

This is what we pray for this Advent. That the Mystery will come...that the Mystery will pursue us...that the Mystery will find us.

This is what we pray for this Advent...that,

“In the first year of the reign of President Biden. When Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi head up the houses of congress...and Doug Ducey is governor of Arizona...and Franklin Graham and Joel Osteen act as

high priests of American Christianity...and Eric Simonson is Executive Director of Spirit in the Desert... we pray that THE WORD OF GOD WILL COME..." the Christ will come.

This is what we pray for this Advent...that

*"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.**"*

Amen

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God

Prepare the Way

(Taize)

Prepare the way of the Lord. And all the people will see the salvation of the Lord

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

My Soul Proclaims

(Marty Haugen)

My soul proclaims your greatness O God, and my spirit rejoices in you.

- 1) My being proclaims the greatness of God. My spirit finds joy in my savior. For you regard me in my lowliness and every age shall call me blest.
- 2) Great and mighty are you, O holy One, strong is your kindness evermore. How you favor the weak and lowly ones. Humbling the proud of heart.
- 3) You have cast down the mighty from their thrones. Raising up those of low degree. You have filled the hungry with wondrous things and sent the rich empty away.

The Meal

Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel

(Salt of the Sound)

O, Come, O, Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel. That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel.

Benediction

Let Your Servant Now Go In Peace

(Taize)

Let your servant now go in peace, O Lord. Now go in peace according to your word.