

Advent 2, Year C

December 6, 2015

Much of what I share with you today comes from a reflection on our Gospel by David Lose

http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx

Last Sunday, the First Sunday of Advent, we began a new church year, and a new lectionary cycle. Our Gospel readings this coming year will be mostly from **Luke's** Gospel. Now Luke loves to situate his Gospel narrative amidst the historical figures of the day. More than any of the other Gospel writers, Luke writes as an historian. *Not*, mind you, an historian of the **twenty-first** century, but rather of the first century. That's when you wrote history to make a point, to teach a truth, to draw people into the community narrative, not just to record facts. And that's what Luke is doing here: placing the beginning of the Christian story – a story that now defines, encourages, and challenges Luke's own community of faith some 50-odd years after Jesus ascended into heaven – Luke places that story into the history of the world.

And this is the *third* time Luke locates the drama he narrates amid the major actors of the world stage. The first time was the birth of John the Baptist “in the days of King Herod of Judah” (1:5). Next is the birth of Jesus that takes place under the rule of Emperor Augustus and while Quirinius was governor of Syria (2:1-3). And now, as John the Baptist is about to start his ministry, Luke again places his story amid prominent historical figures.

Why does Luke do this? Because, in so doing, he is boldly saying that these events of his Gospel narrative – seemingly as small and insignificant as one could imagine – these events deserve to be placed alongside the world-shaking people and events of the day. “Really,” Luke *dares* his readers to ask, “what does the birth of two small children or the ministry of a misplaced prophet have to do with kings, emperors, and governors?” And Luke's reply is: “*Everything!*”

Luke begins his story by making the outrageous claim that God is at work in the weak and small – babies and barren women and unwed teenage mothers and wild-eyed prophets and itinerant preachers and executed criminals – God is at work in these to change the world. And, to be quite honest, God's not done yet. God *continues* to work through unlikely characters today – unpopular teens and out-of-work adults and corporate executives and underpaid secretaries and correctional officers and inmates and CASA volunteers and retired folk dealing with illness – their own and that of their families. God is at work in all of these, in all of **us**, as insignificant as we might think ourselves to be.

Luke's breathtaking claim is that the “word of the Lord” comes to a nobody named John in a no-place called the wilderness, and that that small and insignificant thing is **more** important than all the important people and events of that day. And the clear implication is that that *same* “word of the Lord” might be coming to the nobodies – according to the world – of our own congregation in the middle of the no-places of our various neighborhoods and communities, in the midst of our quite ordinary-seeming lives. The Word of the Lord comes even to us – that's the promise!

It's a **divine** promise that's easy to miss, until we hear what it is Luke is saying in crafting his historical setting. Previously, in narrating the births of John and Jesus, Luke mentioned one or

two powerful historical figures of the time. In **today's** story of the beginning of John's ministry, Luke mentions no less than *seven* historical figures exercising power in John's day. And as we read the list of seven aloud it sounds like an ominous litany or loud and insistent drumbeat marshalling the political, economic, and religious powers and principalities to war:

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...

And against all these stands paltry, insignificant John, son of Zechariah. Well, not quite: against all these stands paltry, insignificant John, son of Zechariah... **and** the word of the Lord. The word, as Isaiah said, that fills valleys and levels mountains, that straightens out what is crooked and smooths over the rough places, all in order to build a direct path by which God can bring us God's love and mercy.

Seven there are representing the collective power of the world and against them all stands just John, armed only with God's word, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and pointing people to the savior who was soon to come.

By the time *Luke's* community was reading these verses, none of those seven are still alive; yet they are **still** telling the story of John and of Jesus, the one John heralds. And today these seven proud and powerful men are just footnotes to the story of Christ, the one sent to reveal the salvation of God to "all flesh."

It is important for us today to hear Luke's message, for we, too, at times feel overlooked, insignificant, and small, surrounded by insurmountable problems, people, and challenges. Maybe it's not an Emperor that makes life miserable, maybe it's just a difficult colleague or family problems. Maybe it's not a Roman procurator that oppresses, but instead a struggle with addiction to alcohol, or financial burdens. Maybe it's not governors that threaten to destroy, but instead feeling lost at school or work or in retirement, with no real friends. Maybe it's not rulers and priests that overwhelm, but instead a struggle with depression, grief, loneliness; or despair at the rampant gun violence and terrorism in our world today.

Whatever it may be, Luke shares the gospel promise that these things, too, will pass; that in the end they will be but a difficult and distant memory; that over time **they** will become mere footnotes to a larger, grander, and more beautiful story of acceptance, grace, mercy, and life. The waiting can be hard, which is why Luke reminds his community and ours of this promise that is so easy to overlook but big enough to save and audacious enough to transform. The promise that God comes not so much into the milieu of the powerful and famous and newsworthy, but into John the Baptist, Mary the illiterate unwed mom and teenager, the no-account shepherds at the very bottom of the economic ladder who serve as the audience for the heavenly choir, and you and I, in the midst of our own little and seemingly insignificant lives. Again and again, Luke confesses, God chooses people the world can easily ignore to participate in God's world-changing, life-changing activity – people like you and me.

God is eager to use our talents and abilities and gifts and resources to change the world, if even in what seems like very small ways – that are, of course, *not* small at all to those who receive such gifts. God can and does work through **our** relationships, our jobs, our family and civic life, our parish and much more to make this world more trustworthy and good. We may not be able to stop all the gun violence and terrorism that is so tragically rampant in these times, but we can allow God to work in the ordinariness of our daily lives, and heal our little corner of the world.

You may have watched the televised program “Christmas in Rockefeller Plaza” this past Thursday night. By far the most moving moment in that program was when The Young People’s Chorus of New York City sang, “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.” Watching the cameras pan across the faces of those young people while they sang, youth from many different cultures ranging in age from 7 to 18, it looked as though they truly believed what they were singing: that peace on earth might at least *begin* with their own young lives. And if **their** lives, why not yours and mine?

In the fifteenth year of the twenty-first century, when Barack was President of the United States, and Francis was Pope, and Justin was Archbishop of Canterbury, and Michael was Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, and John was governor of Colorado, and Janet was Chair of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, the Word of the Lord came to the people of Christ Church, Canon City.

And you and I – ordinary folk unknown to the rest of the world – are called to listen to the word of God coming even to us, and to embody Christ’s mercy and love in our time and in this place.

AMEN