

SERMON- Advent 2 (C)
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Baruch 5:1-9

Canticle 16 (Luke 1: 68-79)

Good Shepherd
December 5, 2021

Luke 3:1-6

OPENING:

In the tenth month of the reign of President Joe Biden,
when *Terry McAuliffe* was governor of Virginia,
and Jeffrey McKay, the ruler of Fairfax,
and James Walkinshaw, the ruler of the region of Braddock,
and Gerry Connolly, ruler of the 11th Congressional District,
during the high priesthood of Bishop(s) Michael Curry and Susan Goff....
the word of God came to the people of Good Shepherd, ,
in the wilderness of Burke.

GOSPEL

How does our Gospel lesson sound, rewritten for 2021?

I noticed, coming up with it, how small the leaders ended up sounding.
With apologies to Joe and Terry and Jeffrey and James and Gerry, and especially to
Bishops Michael and Susan, they all end up sounding kind of inconsequential, kind
of pedestrian.

Even with the grandeur of their titles and authority, the list loses its power, giving
way at the end, with the news of the incredible proclamation coming out, of all
places, the wilderness in Burke.

Luke sets up this “synchronism” (that’s the fancy word for it!) here
—and even more famously in our Christmas reading: “In those days a decree went
out from Emperor Augustus”¹—
so that he can put it all in context, placing that first “Advent” in its socio-religious-
political setting.

Luke is a gifted historian, he knows what he is doing.
He is saying: “Let’s synchronize our watches” rattling off all these famous leaders
and their credentials,
but knowing that the “chronological drumroll”² doesn’t end up holding a candle to
the fellow at the end, John the Baptist, not to mention Jesus.

¹ Luke 2.1a

² Johnson, Luke Timothy. 1990. *Luke*. (Sacra Pagina Commentary Series) Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 67,

Luke does this on purpose; the list should have a forced, intentionally pedantic,³ ring to it. Luke is saying those leaders are NOT THAT GREAT.

Judea was a busted kingdom, the Herods were hated, and Pilate would have been known as the person that would execute Jesus, there was even this petty familial conflict in the office of the high priest.

It's kind of a 'murderer's row' of historical negatives.

So, Luke's detailed list is supposed to help us to place things chronologically, but, more importantly, to understand something deeper about who really is in charge during that time, or any time.

I'll tell a story that, hopefully, drives that point home, but, again, apologizing to our current slate of leaders for the implied comparison.

The story goes that, in 1932, Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. The famous theologian Karl Barth was teaching in Germany at the time and one of his students came up to him and asked him "what should they do?" with Hitler now in charge.

Karl Barth gave this as his response:

"Tell that little man in Berlin, Herr Hitler, that he is not Lord of History, the Lord of History is a crucified Jew in Jerusalem."⁴

That's the tense juxtaposition, that's the conflict that Luke is introducing in this passage: it's that same type of conflict that would bring SS officers into Barth's classroom and that would get him exiled from Germany shortly thereafter. And, of course, it's the type of conflict that would get John the Baptist and Jesus killed.

OLD TESTAMENT

When reading this synchronism, it's maybe also important, knowing your Old Testament, to remember that we have seen this pattern before, because you are reminded:

"God has never played by those rules....." of hierarchy and earthly powers.

God doesn't care about those types of lists.

³ Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. "Theological Perspective." (Luke 3.1-6) in *Feasting on the Word* (Year C, Volume 1) 46.

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/jason.micheli.3/videos/10223935408915328> (around the 20 minute mark)

God is going to write God's story in some unexpected way, from some forgotten corner, some unlikely source.

Barren mothers, a teenage virgin, loin-clothed preachers, a Jewish carpenter. That sort of thing.

Deliverance and salvation comes from those *off* the famous lists, from those in exile and in wilderness.

That's the grand narrative of Scripture—a story of reversals, and of unexpected rescue, and of an unconditional and sometimes illogical love.

Now...

that's all great...

that God does that... in the past... in those timelines.

Do we believe, though, that it could happen here, in this synchronism, at this time? In this wilderness of Burke?

Do we believe that the word of God COULD COME to the Church of the Good Shepherd, that our spiritual wilderness could be the ground that nurtures such a Word and be able to proclaim it?

2nd PART:

Let's go back and replay the second half of our Gospel lesson, with our modern-day adjustments:

As it is written in the book of "Isaiah" ...:

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

Relieve the traffic congestion of I-95,

So that every route shall be that of the EZ Pass and every traffic light will be made green.

And every container will be lifted onto the supply chain and, verily, the Amazon trucks will make their deliveries in time for Christmas.'

How does that sound? Not much of a proclamation from the wilderness.

I, for one, am not much of a prophet. It's low hanging fruit to go after our consumerist culture (that I participate in fully) and our oh-so-human politicians and

I think it's our job, though, to find ourselves lacking, to recognize that I am not John the Baptist.

That we are indeed more Tiberius and Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas than we are ready to usher in God's rule with smooth paths.

HOPE

It's okay that we are inadequate to the task.

The wilderness is where the Exodus will begin, where God begins his revolution.

Anne's words from here last week struck me: in Advent, she said, our power is in our hope, it's in our waiting our expectancy, our patient preparation.

Our power is our potential energy, if I remember high school physics correctly. It's a pulsating, pregnant capability, tingling with expectation.

Anne used the example of the Civil Rights movement, and the long period of interminable waiting that African Americans experienced and are experiencing in this country.

She mentioned Rosa Parks as an exemplar of Advent energy, in that Rosa Parks was waiting, waiting all those years but, all the time, also preparing, learning, building relationships.

The story goes that, after Parks had been arrested, a group of church leaders were arguing in a dingy church basement about what to do and how to respond, who would lead them in what would become the Montgomery Bus Boycott, who would be their prophet, their voice in the wilderness?

They finally decided on someone, the youngest one there. Of all the church leaders, they chose the newbie, Martin Luther King, Jr. because they could blame it on him if things went sideways.

King himself said: "I would (have) left (the gathering) but it was my church (that they were meeting in.)"⁵

CONCLUSION

They were waiting, powerless and unready, but they had hope and thus were ultimately, quoting from Anne again here: "waiting for something that they already possessed."⁶

Karl Barth says as Christians we are always in Advent, that's our perpetual season, regardless of the month or year. Always in the "in between times." We are always waiting, but never ready. Always hoping, always expectant, patient, listening, knowing that that voice is about to cry out.

AMEN

⁵ Branch, Taylor. 1988. *Parting the Waters. (American in the King Years 1954-1963, Vol. 1)* New York: Simon and Schuster, 137.

⁶ Anne Gavin Ritchie, "What are Waiting For? (Advent 1, November 28, 2021)