

Year C Advent 2 The Leveling Luke 3 1 to 6

In today's gospel, we hear of some of the "major surgery" that I mentioned last week. Some pretty drastic things are going to happen to our world – mountains brought low, valleys filled in. For the second week in a row, we are hearing apocalyptic literature. Remember that "apocalypse" is the Greek word for "revelation" or "disclosure." God's kingdom will be fully disclosed on earth as in heaven. It will be fully revealed when God has purged all of the brokenness from us and from the world, leaving nothing but the beauty of perfection.

As Luke describes how this brokenness will be healed through some major landscaping, he is telling us some very important things about God's kingdom without even mentioning God's kingdom. From beginning to end of this Gospel reading, Luke paints a beautiful picture of what we are waiting for – a beautiful picture of hope for those of us, and a world, so desperately in need of hope. What is Luke telling us about the perfection of the kingdom we await? Let's find out.

Luke begins his introduction of John the Baptist's ministry in a very strange way. He begins by listing the who's who of Judean politics – and he starts at the top...The emperor of the entire Roman Empire – Tiberius – is listed first. Below that we have the governor – Pontius Pilate. Next comes the king of Judea – Herod, the puppet king of the Roman Empire, and finally Philip, Herod's brother, and Lysanius ruling nearby. These are the men wielding all of the worldly political and economic power in John the Baptist's – and Jesus' – neck of the woods.

Luke goes on to name the top dogs of the religious powerhouse as well – Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests. They wield their religious power under the watchful eye of the Roman Empire but wield power they most certainly do.

Into this top-down lowdown on the rich and powerful of Israel – the ones you do not mess with – enters John...small, unimportant, John...son of the small, unimportant priest Zechariah. There couldn't be more of a contrast between the mighty and powerful political and religious leaders and John the Baptist. The mighty in their fancy, clean clothes, made of luxurious materials and John...in camel hair. The powerful eating their meals of delightful delicacies in the company of other rich and powerful people and John...dining on locusts alone...in the wilderness.

But John has something the powerful rulers do not...John has the word of God. The word of God comes to John in the wilderness. And so the small, the unexpected, the apparently trivial comes in answer to the problems of a political and religious system in which the small and the trivial, the needy and the vulnerable, have been pushed aside and pushed down...pushed down by the wealthy who want more wealth...pushed aside by the powerful who want more power. Those left to scrape by, eke out an existence, are working hard...sometimes needing to beg to get by. They are working hard for those who pushed them down, begging from those who pushed them aside.

Into the midst of this, John appears, proclaiming God's word of hope – the great leveling is coming. The valleys will be filled in and the mountains and hills will be flattened. The crooked paths and streams will be made straight and all of the

rough will be made smooth. In other words, all will be made orderly and equal – all on the same level...the great leveling is coming.

We know that this leveling has more to do with the people dwelling on the earth than with the earth itself. The earth will be transformed into the perfection of the full revelation of God's kingdom but we certainly do not visualize that perfection as being a monotonous landscape of complete flatness and utterly straight paths and streams. This passage, originally spoken by the prophet Isaiah to the Jewish people in exile in Babylon, this passage is about the people – it is a word of hope to the small and the powerless, delivered by the voice of one who is small and powerless saying God is true to his promise – things are changing, the lowly will be lifted up, the powerful will be brought down – everyone will be on equal footing...status, wealth, power...all will be levelled.

We know that Luke is passing on this message of hope to us because he makes sure we know. When Luke wrote his gospel, all seven of those powerful political and religious figures were dead – a fact not lost on Luke's audience. Luke has introduced to us the worldly powers and the seemingly insignificant figures, of John and the Messiah John proclaims, who would oppose those worldly powers. John comes preaching repentance and forgiveness – a turning away from the power represented by those seven powerful men. John tells of the coming of the Lord who will follow him, the Messiah who will also preach a turning away from that worldly power. Both John and the Messiah will end up dead, but their deaths – and especially, Christ's resurrection – will shake the foundations of power these seven represent and stand upon. Those powerful men are dead and gone but the followers of the One John proclaimed – they are flourishing, they are

continuing to proclaim and to live God's message of a turning away from worldly power that will bring about a new life for the pushed down and the pushed aside.

Luke's portrait of hope for all those who await equality, for all those who await the time when everyone has what they need, is also a call to action. John's proclamation is aimed directly at the people, aimed directly at us. The hearers of John's words are being told what to do – the Messiah is coming and we have work to do...we are to prepare his way, we are to straighten his path. We are not to simply be benefactors of the coming of the Messiah... we are to be partners in the great leveling. And then something amazing will happen – all flesh will see the salvation of God.

We begin our partnership by being reminded all through Advent that, as we await the coming of our King, we are to re-orient our lives toward God, to continuously make the effort to turn away from worldly power. It is no coincidence that John was proclaiming this word of God in the wilderness by the Jordan River. The wilderness in Scripture is the place where we are close to God...but it is not a comfy, cozy place. It is the place where we are challenged to hear God, to listen to God, and to change our lives and our thinking so that we line up with what God wants for us and for the world. When God saved the Israelites from the empire of Egypt, the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness learning to hear God, to align their ways with God's ways, and when they were ready, they entered the promised land by crossing the Jordan River, they entered the promised land, aligned with God and ready to live God's way. Of course, they blew it just as we blow it many times over during our lives. But, John is in the wilderness, calling to

us to re-enter the promised land through the Jordan River by turning our lives back to God.

God waits patiently for us as we spend time in the wilderness, striving to hear God, striving to do what God wants us to do, turning our ways to God's ways. This is an ongoing transformation for us but, with effort, we will spend less and less time in the wilderness and more and more time in the promised land.

We quickly realize that the promised land does not resemble the promised land if we allow ourselves and others to turn it, not just back into wilderness, but into empire – the empire that God saves us from, the empire Jesus died to abolish.

Staying in the promised land requires a lot of work. We must continuously be preparing the way of the Lord, straightening his paths. We may not be discriminated against like other people are, we may not be homeless and destitute but neither are we the rich and powerful. We often face the reality that we are “the little guy” at the mercy of the larger institutions and corporations. It often takes a lot of work to get something done when up against a big company that does not care about us. But, we, “the little guy” are told today that we are called by God to be the movers and the shakers, not of the world, but of God's kingdom.

James Billington, the Librarian of Congress and a student of Russian history, happened to be in Moscow in August of 1991, the tumultuous time when the old Soviet regime was giving way to a new social order. These were tense and dangerous days, and power was balanced on a razor's edge.

Boris Yeltzin and a small group of defenders occupied the Russian White House and successfully managed to fend off an enormous number of tanks and troops poised to attack and put down the rebellion, to restore the old guard in the Soviet Union.

Surprisingly, a key role in this successful resistance was played, said Billington, by the babushkas, the "old women in the church," through their courageous public Christian witness. These bandana-wearing old women, who had kept the Orthodox Christian church alive for years during the Soviet period, were the butt of many jokes over the years by both Russians and Westerners. Nothing could have seemed more pathetic or irrelevant than they – relics of the past – and they were widely regarded as evidence of the eventual death of religion in the Soviet Union.

And yet on the critical night of August 20, 1991, when martial law was proclaimed, and people were told to go to their homes, many of these women disobeyed and went immediately to the place of confrontation. Some of them fed the resisters in a public display of support. Others staffed medical stations, others prayed for a miracle, while still others, astoundingly, climbed up onto the tanks, peered through the slits at the crew-cut men inside and told them there were new orders, orders from God:

Thou shalt not kill.

The young men stopped the tanks. The attack, said Billington, never came, and by dawn of the third day they realized that the tide had turned.

As we think on those babushkas, let us also think on our ladies in the knitting club, on the cookie bakers and tea-sippers, on the retired gentlemen who gather daily for coffee, on John the Baptist the insignificant son of an insignificant priest proclaiming the coming of an apparently insignificant nobody from Nazareth. No one is too small to be called by God to change the world, to reveal God's kingdom. We, in fact, small people sitting in our small and seemingly unimportant church, we have been chosen by God to be movers and shakers in his kingdom, to be the ones to help turn the world upside-down, to reveal God's kingdom to a broken world. We have been called to the most important task there is...The great leveling is coming and we are fellow landscapers. We must, and we can – together – prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his path and let all flesh see the salvation of God.