

Year C Advent 2 2024 Our Exodus Luke 3 vv1 to 6

Luke starts us off today with a very long list of the rulers in power at the time of John the Baptist's arrival on the scene to begin his ministry. This list places the story within history for sure but it does much more than that. It sets before us, with clanging bells and flashing neon signs, the two very different kingdoms in which we could choose to live out our days. Notice, too, that the powerful people include both the political and the religious. They operate together, hand in hand, and both land squarely in the ways of the world.

This long list of the world's most powerful figures also lets us know something extremely important about God and God's kingdom. God brings about salvation in real events, with the co-operation of real people, in real places. As Professor Troy Trofgruben says, "God saves not in Neverland or 'somewhere over the rainbow,' but in history. Corrupt, messy, and complicated as historical events and situations are, that is where God saves" (workingpreacher.org). God saves here among us, with our help. Before you say, "I'm just one person, what can I do?", John the Baptist is center stage in our story today and John the Baptist was just one person. John, in fact, is one in a long line of solitary people who loom large in the Story of Salvation. As I said in my sermon last week, we are not simply readers of the Story or hearers of the Story. We are IN the Story. We are living the Story right now. So what is being written about you, about us, right now? What are we doing to advance the plot of this great Story?

To help decide what we should be doing to keep the Story rolling along, we need to explore this piece with John the Baptist more closely. We need to know what it means to repent and to be saved and that will help us keep moving forward in the

right direction, keep doing what we need to be doing – or begin something new – together and individually so that we “see the salvation of God” as John cries out today.

Luke starts us off with Tiberius Caesar, ruler of the known world, and then brings us in – smaller and smaller – until finally, we meet John, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah the priest. No one special. No one of great renown. Except he was and is special and important, isn't he? The word of God came to him. God spoke to John. God continues to speak to people. God speaks to you. God spoke to you earlier today, as a matter of fact, and I know this because you are here. The Church is called into existence by God and so, when you are here like this, we are gathered as the Church and it was God who brought you here. That may leave you wondering how you can know if it is God's voice calling to you or simply your own wants and needs or even the world's voice beckoning to you. Perhaps we are never quite sure but Luke does help us out with this question. John is in the wilderness – the *eremos*. The wilderness is extremely important throughout the whole of our Story. The Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness. Jesus was driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit after his baptism. The wilderness – again, more clanging bells and flashing neon signs from Luke – the wilderness is the place where people encounter God. The wilderness is the place where people struggle to discern God's ways and God's will for them, to learn in greater detail how they are to work with God toward the fulfillment of God's purpose of heaven's complete union with earth. The wilderness is the place where people pray because prayer is our two-way communication with God. It is where we enter into God's presence and grow in our relationship with God. It is a place where we feel God's love and learn to become God's love. And so, John is in the wilderness

and the word of God comes to him. When we are open, and waiting, and listening, God comes to us.

Just like one of the many prophets over the centuries, John is given a message from God to proclaim to the people. It is always the same message – different words, same basic message. Luke uses the words of the prophet Isaiah to deliver the message and it is amazing and astounding: 'Prepare the way of the Lord,' John cries out. '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.'

What does all of this mean? It means God is coming good on his promise.

Generations of prophets have shouted out God's promise to mend all of the brokenness, to gather the scattered people of Israel into his kingdom perfected on earth where all people would be showered with God's love and creation would be healed from our misuse of it. For hundreds of years, the people had been hearing this promise. For hundreds of years the people had been hearing that God would send someone to make it happen – to lead God's people in the second great Exodus.

Why call it the second Exodus? The Exodus was the pivotal saving event when God rescued his people from oppression in Egypt. He delivered them out of the grip of materialism and consumerism fueled by the desire for 'more and better'. He redeemed them from the brokenness of a human power system that creates levels of society and leads to crime, injustice, neglect of the vulnerable, and so on. These words that we hear in the story of the Exodus – salvation and deliverance and redemption – are the same words that we hear applied to Jesus and even

spoken by Jesus himself at times [when he says he is a ransom for many, for example]. Salvation is to be brought out of the brokenness of the world's ways of doing and being, into the wholeness of God's ways of doing and being.

God rescued them and made a covenant with them – he would be their God and they would be his people and they would live according to his ways in order to avoid the establishment of a broken human power system once more. With God in their midst, the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land where God would reign and they would live according to the covenant between them. Of course, the Israelites, human as they were, failed in this endeavour. They could not let go of the desire for 'more and better'. They turned from God and broke the covenant again and again. This turning from God's ways back to the ways of human power, this breaching of the covenant between them and God, they called "sin".

The people longed for the "fleshpots" of Egypt and chased after other gods. They wanted the glitz and glamour, the luxuries and extravagances of the consumerist and materialistic world even though they had not actually benefitted from this world. They had been the ones without and yet they desired to have it. That's how alluring the power of the world is. Those Israelites who could manage it, began to live the lifestyle of the powerful they'd seen in Egypt and, soon enough, in the Promised Land, there were the rich people and the poor people, those who were admired, and those who shunned, those who swindled to get more, those who took advantage of the vulnerable to further their own well-being. This is precisely the situation we face outside our doors. The Israelites could not resist the lure of human power and are we doing any better?

Time after time, again and again, God spoke through the prophets to call the people to turn back to him and to his ways. Turn back and leave the crazy, competitive, cutthroat, never have enough world behind and I will pour out my love upon you and you will have everything you need, you will want for nothing, and you will have true joy. Just turn back.

No surprise, John's first word to the people is "turn back". Repent, he says. Turn back. Also no surprise, he delivers this message at the Jordan River. He is calling Israel to symbolically re-enter the Promised Land, to renew the covenant and live as God's people, according to God's ways, in God's kingdom. It is their second chance to participate in the Exodus – to leave behind the ways of the world and embrace God's ways. It is their chance to get it right.

It is our chance to turn as well. Lutheran Pastor Petunia Chung-Segre describes this turning, this repenting, in this way: "Turning around describes vividly the process we go through when we truly repent. We turn around and face the other direction. Actions and thoughts that were part of our former stance are no longer acceptable. Turning around implies a radical change in attitude. Whereas in our former state we might have been inclined to act one way, as we make the decision to turn around we resolve to change the way we respond to others" (p.15 of Augsburg Sermons 3). Repentance is a radical change of heart and we will know we have truly repented when our actions reflect our change of heart. "Instead of being focused on self, we look beyond our own needs to focus on what God would have us do in response to our neighbour's needs. Our eyes become opened to see the wounds of our brothers and sisters" (p.15-16 Augsburg).

As we undergo this process of repentance – because it is an ongoing process, constantly requiring us to check our direction in the wilderness and make the constant course corrections back to God’s ways – as we keep improving, with the help of the Holy Spirit, on this “good work that was begun in us”, as Paul says, we *will be* preparing the way of the Lord, making his path straight, allowing him quicker, easier access to us and to the world. We *will be* working to fill in the valleys and bring low the mountains, creating a level playing field of equality and justice and resources for everyone. Our flesh *will* see the salvation of God. Notice the use of the word “flesh”. It doesn’t say “people”. It doesn’t say “humanity”. It says “flesh” – our skin, our flesh and bone and blood will see God’s salvation – God’s rescue. Our flesh will see God’s salvation because when we turn, we are turning into life in God’s kingdom **now**. In baptism, we made a new covenant with God, to be God’s people and live according to God’s ways in God’s Promised Land. The meal we share is our repeatable part of that covenant – our reaffirmation that we’re trying, with God’s help, to do this – rejecting the dominant ways, the attractive ways, of the world. Jesus has opened the kingdom of God to all believers and we must constantly choose to live in it. Jesus leads our Exodus. Let us be God’s people together and repent.