

3rd Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.12.21

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. (300)

Watch. Watch what happens. We must watch what happens as we watch this whole story from Luke’s point of view. Our gospel writer for this whole coming year, Luke has a trick up his sleeve. Luke believes in Jesus as having a trick up his sleeve. A performer of a great trick, a performer of a great reversal: especially according to Luke, Jesus will manage a great reversal. The last shall be first. The least shall be greatest. The Lord will have brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. The Lord will have filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. The Lord will have come in fire—unquenchable fire, fire for burning deadwood and chaff, fire that causes vipers to flee. The Lord will have come in fire—and from this will forge the church, born amidst tongues as of fire filling the disciples with the Holy Spirit. The church, where the burning will be though as candles in the dark, where the Holy Spirit will burn as gentleness and joy, unquenchable fire which is to say not a punishing fire or a tormenting fire or a consuming fire but a sustaining fire, as of the fire that burned that bush of long ago, burned it though didn’t consume it.

Luke is playing a long game—and it’s good news for all.

Luke understands the gospel as playing out a long game—and it’s good news for all.

John, though...?

We begin with John, who knows his place but not necessarily the point. John knows the part he's to play in this whole story, but doesn't seem to know the point of it all. How could he, though, as this whole story will utterly defy expectations?

John is Jesus' cousin. Born of old Elizabeth and the old priest Zechariah, he was the miracle baby of his family. Elizabeth was the kinswoman of young Mary, who would have a miracle baby of her own. Next Sunday, we'll move back in time to when these two women will have visited one another, Mary at the home of her kinswoman, Elizabeth, for a three-month stay while both were pregnant, Elizabeth six months further along.

Zechariah, for his part, was a priest who'd been struck dumb while in the sanctuary of the Temple. The angel Gabriel had come to him in the sanctuary, that secluded sacred place where it was his turn to serve that day. (Priests take turns.) Gabriel had come with news of John's conception and birth yet to take place—this though both Elizabeth and Zechariah were old. When Zechariah pointed this out—that both he and his wife were old—Gabriel said that for this wobbling skepticism Zechariah wouldn't be able to speak anymore until John was born and named.

And so it was.

John must never drink wine or strong drink, Gabriel also said, because, as it was, he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. He wouldn't need any more spirit in him than was already the case, which was the case since before his birth. Even in the womb, John leapt about.

And now here he was, grown and on the move, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

Funny thing, though: we never actually see him baptize anyone. According to Luke, we never actually see John baptize anyone, not even Jesus. We hear him proclaim it—a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, a baptism of *metanoia*, that change of mind, that transformation of mind that can best occur when forgiveness and love are forgone conclusions, which they are with this God of whom John spoke. We hear him proclaim such a baptism, we see people come out for it, but we never actually see the act. Instead, Luke presses upon us another point: "What must we do?" The people wondered. Three times here, like a mantra, the people wondering, "What must we do?" And only according to Luke: "What must we do?"

It's as if, according to Luke, there is indeed something we *can* do, something we *should* do.

That doesn't always seem to be the case. Especially according to Mark, the gospel we mostly followed last year, the event of Jesus in the world doesn't necessarily press upon us that there's

anything we should do, really anything we *can* do. This is all God's doing, and it is wonderful in our sight.

Mark is my favorite gospel, but I'll admit I'm often at a loss because of it. Mark's understanding of Jesus was that he was one of a kind, intensely singular, and absolutely the presence of God come to the world. Jesus could affect things, according to Mark, simply by his showing up. His arrival in a place would set evil to flight from that place, bring darkness to light in that place. Jesus cast from his being the reign of God the way the rest of us cast a shadow on a sunny day. We don't *try* to do it; we just do it. We don't *mean* to do it; it just happens—which I feel like I said a million times last year. "I love this guy. I love this story. But I don't really know what to do about it all." Not a great look for a preacher.

We see this also in Mark's remembering of the disciples. They frequently got it wrong. They seldom got it right. They were always scrambling to catch up with this Jesus who was always and ever going ahead of them. Even at the resurrection, it was said (the angel or the man all in white at the tomb saying) to the women who'd come there with spices to anoint the body, "He's not here. He's gone ahead, just as he said. Go tell the other disciples that he's gone ahead to Galilee, that they should all go there, for there they will see him and from there they can follow him again."

So, scrambling again. Off to Galilee! Back to where it all began. Back to go through it again. And on it goes, these two thousand years later, a wonder-filled walk but lacking the imperative that we're to do something here.

There's even a commentary called *Say to This Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship* that I asked a colleague about our possibly reading it in our book group, someone who's spent a lot of time with Mark's gospel. "It's good," he said, "but it tries too hard to prove a misbegotten point. I just don't think Mark's story is one of discipleship."

Luke's understanding of Jesus is different. For Luke, there is very much something we can do about it all, something indeed we *should* do about it all. Really, that's largely the point. Jesus according to Luke *began* the work of God in the world; Jesus *began* the bringing of good news to the world. But he was just the beginning. Upon his death and resurrection and ascension to heaven, Jesus will have completed his work, and now the Holy Spirit would come in a new way. Luke's two books imply as much. Luke-Acts, this diptych, is itself a show of this conviction. In the gospel narrative, the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus is the main character. But in the 2nd book, Acts of the Apostles, he's hardly to be found, just in the first chapter in a scene where he leaves,

taken up on a cloud. From there, the Holy Spirit is the main character, arriving as fire, but fire that has surprising effect, sustaining effect: the church.

Of course, Luke's gospel comes to us from later in the story of salvation, later in that first century.

Mark was the first one to write it all down—in the year 68 or 70, when it was still felt as a fresh and sudden mystery, when God incarnate was still felt as a taking the world by force, a taking-back of the world by force. The force of God in face of the forces of this world—imperial, cultic, powers and principalities and Temple cults. In Jesus, the kingdom of God had arrived to take back the world that had fallen to enemy hands, to free the world which had become occupied by oppression and hostility. Jesus had come as a ransom, to ransom the world from its captors, a payment of God's own life so God's creation might be free and flourishing as intended.

This, because Mark apparently writes from a moment in history of sudden undoing, Rome attacking, the empire setting fire to destroy, one day the Temple yet standing, the next it under assault, and the whole Jewish people decimated, and eventually more so.

It must have felt like the end.

It must have felt like the moment when Jesus would return. This Jesus who had lived and died and been raised and now whom Mark was remembering in his writing: he'd be back any moment. He simply had to be, this one who had such singular effect. His mission had been unsuccessful since his leaving because what could anyone do but him?

That's what it must have felt like.

He'd be back. Any minute.

Any moment now.

While history goes to hell.

Twenty, thirty years later, Luke would offer his gospel testimony. And time had worn on. And the crisis had become the new norm, and it began even to resemble the old norm, just with a few more restrictions, just pocked by more than a few terrible losses. And Jesus hadn't returned.

Or had he?

The church? Born of fire, sustained by the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ? The incarnate corporate body of the mystical Christ?

I had a conversation with someone the other day. He was talking with me about the service of Lessons and Carols we've got coming up. He was recounting all the crises we've got before us these days, and he asked me if I thought maybe God had come to the point where he was gonna

“pull the trigger,” maybe send someone back down here. He wasn’t quite asking, he wasn’t quite declaring, that maybe this was the end, and the second coming was coming. He admitted somewhere in his nervous supposing that he didn’t know much about the Bible but maybe that was happening, God’s gonna “pull the trigger.” Maybe, because you’ve got the climate and we’re just so divided as a country and Covid, Covid, this old crisis now new norm.

“Or maybe the second coming happened,” I said, though he didn’t hear me. “Maybe the second coming is here.” Really, maybe it happened shortly after Jesus left, ascended, ten days later when the Holy Spirit came, according to the story. Tongues of fire. The birth of the church. What if it happened and we largely missed it? What if it happened, and it’s us?

That man was right about one thing: he doesn’t know much about the Bible. He seemed to know about as much as John, who knew that things are terribly wrong with the world but couldn’t quite imagine how to make them right. In his heralding a coming one who would baptize the world with the Holy Spirit and with fire, it’s as if he’d forgotten what fire can also do.

And this man’s not hearing me: that seems about right, right? The church is largely ignored these days, at least in societies like ours. We preach good news, and the anxious hum and mumble of the world overwhelm. We impress upon people the saving nature of lovingkindness and establishing justice, and people stay away. We gather in joy, in beauty and joy, and the world as if wants something other than this—something more dramatic, some spectacle, some fearsome thing, something in any event other than just this—*this*, which is both too little and way too much. Every week, every day, every moment, the church and its humble, faithful, even joyful witness, demanding our time and talent, and our treasure.

Of course, there are lots of reasons supposed as to why the church is largely ignored. Some of them are our fault. Some of them are not. There are countless books about it all. I read a lot of them. They help me understand what on earth is going on.

Meanwhile, the fire still burns, warm, often bright.

Do you believe this?

Do you need help believing this?

We’re here for that— every week, every day, every moment even.

Thanks be to God.