

Sermon: The Sacred Here and Now

Year C, Advent 2

[Malachi 3:1-4](#); [Luke 1:68-79](#); [Philippians 1:3-11](#); [Luke 3:1-6](#)

Offered December 6, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

[The map referred to in the sermon follows the text.]

My hairdresser is going more upscale. It's getting harder and harder to find *People*, in amongst all the shelter magazines. And can you believe that's what they're called? Shelter magazines. As if anything ever shown in *Architectural Digest* or *House Beautiful* or *Elle Décor* was shelter. I know people who can leaf through those magazines and get ideas. When I look through them, I just get frustrated. None of those places look like my home. And even if I wanted my home to look like the pictures, and even if I could somehow stage my home to look like the pictures, it couldn't be that tidy and still be lived in. And none of those places look like they could absorb the messiness of daily mail and a dog and any adults who don't have a raging case of OCD, let alone kids. I know they're fantasy. What I think I find so frustrating is that they purport to be real.

Luke is launching into the story that we will read on Christmas Eve, about that baby in the manger, with the angels and the shepherds. Luke is heading into the story where God will come to earth as tiny and vulnerable as a baby born without shelter on a cold night in a desert town. Luke is getting ready to tell a story about how that baby grows up to preach and teach and show the world how to live into the reality that God's kingdom will be built here, on this earth. Could there be anything that sounds more like a fantasy than that?

So Luke makes sure that we know it's not a fantasy about some gods who live on Mt. Olympus and come down and mingle with us ignorant mortals for their own entertainment. Luke makes sure that we know that by anchoring the story on a particular patch of ground and a particular stretch of history.

So let's really look at what Luke did. *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* (Luke 3:1). On the cover of your bulletin is a map. Let's start at the top. You'll see an arc of labels, Phoenicia/Syria/Abilene. Below the labels you'll see a dotted line. That's the southern border of the Roman province of Syria. From that line to the bottom of the Dead Sea had been ruled by Herod the Great.

As he died, he divided his kingdom, and he was a king, into four parts. His son Phillip got the chunk directly south of the Roman provide of Syria, Ituraea and Trachonitis. Phillip's brother and Herod's son, Herod Antipas, got Galilee and Peraea. Herod's son Herod Archelaus got Judea and Samaria. And Herod's son-in-law got a chunk of the coast around Gaza. The Decapolis, the ten cities, although they were really more like small towns, reported directly to Rome.

Now maybe that could have worked, but the economics of the region were against it. There are two deep water and fully functional ports, Tyre and Sidon. They're in the Roman province. You can continue down the coast of the Mediterranean, and you'll see three more ports. Caesarea was completely man made by the Romans. They basically built an enormous breakwater. But it never really worked as a port. Further down are Joppa and Gaza. While they would serve for local craft, you couldn't bring the big ships that carried cargo around the Mediterranean in there.

The one thing ancient Israel had going for it economically was that it was at an international crossroads. Luxury goods coming from further east, from Iran and Iraq, from India and China, had to get to the Mediterranean somehow. While Israel had no deep water ports, they could easily support road traffic. So look at the map again.

Phillip controls the section of Israel that leads to the deep water ports. If the Roman emperor wants more in taxes, all Philip has to do is lean on the caravans coming through. And he does.

Judea and Samaria are home to the holy sites of Israel. If the Israelites want to rebel against Rome, that is where they will do it. That is where they have the most organization and the most ability to rally their forces coherently. Militarily they may not be able to take down Rome, but they can make life so difficult, force Rome to commit so large a level of military resources, that Rome will suffer in other areas. So the minute that Herod Archelaus starts to do a lousy job running Judea and Samaria, he's ousted and replaced by a governor appointed directly by the Roman emperor. The governor of the sites most sacred to the Jewish people is Pontius Pilate, a non-Jew.

And right at the crossroads of this crossroad is ... Galilee. Herod Antipas in theory controls a quarter of his father's territory, but it is split into two pieces. On purpose, to keep him from gaining too much power. If he is to make a play for being the king of Israel as his father was, he has to outstrip his brother Phillip and whichever Roman governor is running Judea. He has to wring taxes out of a country that is peopled with subsistence farmers who can barely keep their families fed.

This geography is a harsh one and does not serve the economic or political demands of the people who control it from Rome. The people who live there suffer from the distortions that those in power subject it to, trying to force wealth out of a country that has very little to be wealthy with. The men who rule the pieces of this geography are all ambitious. In the previous generation, there had been a king of Israel. Each one of them believed he should be the new king over this generation. Look at the map on the cover of your bulletin. Look at the lines of division and realize who is controlling which piece and understand it the way Luke did. There is nothing coming out of this particular piece of land at this particular time except war and famine. There will be violence and bloodshed, all so that someone, raised in luxury, may call himself *basileus* or "king" rather than *ethnarch*, "ruler of the people". The vast majority of the health and wellbeing of people in this region are being sacrificed over a title to be written on someone's tomb.

So the story that Luke is about to tell, the amazing story of grace upon grace, of undeserved love and mercy, this story will come out of the heart of human conflict and striving. Look at Israel a crossroads completely controlled by Rome, look at Galilee caught between two stronger states, look into Nazareth, the heart of Galilee, and you will see something that simply should not be there. Luke is saying look there in order to see the salvation God is offering.

Luke wants to be sure we understand the true nature of the story he is about to tell. This is The Story of The God of The Covenant. Malachi talked about him coming back. He's coming back. John the Baptist talked about him coming back. He's coming back. And he's coming out of the heart of the greatest anxiety and most perilous balance, from the part of the world that is just barely holding it together.

Where is that today? Look at Syria with all its political turmoil and violent death. That is where you'll catch a glimpse of God's salvation. Look at the Central African Republic with ethnic

cleansing a hairs' breadth away from breaking out. That is where you'll catch a glimpse of God's salvation. Look at San Bernadino, Chicago, Ferguson, Paris, look at the food pantry across the street in the richest country in the world. Look down in my office where we have gift cards for families who just want to go out to eat for dinner. Look in the emergency rooms and ambulances loaded with Narcan to counteract heroin overdoses that are sold for less than \$5/hit. That is where you'll catch a glimpse of God's salvation.

But here's the thing, the Advent thing. There are places of intense anxiety and perilous balance inside of each one of us. Maybe it is the drinking you'd rather not think about this season. Maybe it is the financial challenges you'll put off facing until January. Maybe it is the beginnings of a drift into dementia or the helplessness of watching a kid headed toward disaster because they can't manage their impulses. Maybe it is all the special food whose calorie count cannot be worth the pleasure it affords. Whatever it is, it is that place where you know for certain you'll never catch a glimpse of God's salvation. You know that God's salvation is not there because when you are in that place, you know you are not worth saving.

Start in that place, in that place of hopelessness and despair, in that place of false dominion and contention, of powerlessness and subjugation. Start in that place to make God's path straight.

We want to meet the baby in Luke's story with our houses warm and well lit, with presents perfectly selected and gorgeously wrapped. We want our houses to smell of homemade recipes from our grandparents. We want everyone gathered under our roof to feel safe and strong. So we pave over and widen the parts of our life that are already going pretty well, the parts that probably don't need saving at all. This is the time of year where we throw more and more on our to do lists, so what's one or two more valleys to be filled, a couple of mountains to be made low, some rough smoothed out or crooked straight. We're willing to do all that, so long as we don't have to go into the deep, craggy, rough, crooked parts of ourselves.

It's just that that is where salvation is coming from. It is coming from the places torn apart in the political and economic rip tides. It's coming from where the strong are destroying the weak. It's coming from the broken, frightened, devastated corners of our world. It's coming from our worst, most un-save-able selves. All flesh shall see the salvation of God in the sacred here and now in which we live.

