

Sermon: Stewarding the Light

Year C, Second Sunday of Advent

[Baruch 5:1-9](#); [Malachi 3:1-4](#); [Luke 1:68-79](#); [Philippians 1:3-11](#); [Luke 3:1-6](#)

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I listen to a lot of audiobooks. I have a better audio memory than visual one; I remember what I hear way better than what I read. I've tried all different kinds of books, but there's one kind I can't listen to: Russian literary classics. I even took an adult ed class in the Russian classics. Couldn't listen to them, couldn't read them on paper. Why not? Because I can't keep the names straight. They're all too similar. Is that the matriarch or the maid? Is he the hero or just some jamoke showing up to say the horses are ready? Because names matter, people matter, the roles they play matter. The story doesn't make any sense if you don't know who someone is.

In part, that's why I tortured Sanjay and asked him to read the passage from the third chapter of Luke. We needed all those names. They're not names we're familiar with. Aside from emperor, we're not really familiar with the roles they play. And because we're not familiar, we kind of skip over them and reduce them to the mwah, mwah, mwah of the adults in the Peanuts cartoons.

So, sure, the bottom line is: repent for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3) and prepare the way of the Lord (Luke 3:4). We're not even into Jesus' ministry yet and we're hearing some of the major themes. They're not surprising, since they're themes that have come from the Old Testament. Indeed, that whole *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* (Luke 3:5) is a quote from the Prophet Isaiah. What *is* shocking is who God says it to. That's why it's important to keep track of who is who. And who God says it to conveys a much deeper meaning than appears on the surface.

So let's start with today's first reading from the first chapter of Luke. Zechariah is singing to his son, John, telling him of all the great things John will do. John will become John the Baptizer, John the Baptist; he will indeed be a prophet and prepare the way of the Lord (Luke 1:76). John was born to Elizabeth, one of Mary's cousins. Elizabeth was barren. Zechariah was old. Zechariah completely doubted whether they would have children. And yet here is little Johnnie, who is going to take on a huge role with great fervor, who is going to baptize his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth to start Jesus' ministry. Of all the people in the world, of all the families in the world, God chose Zechariah and Elizabeth and John. These folks, nothing terribly special, are going to be the ones to start preparing the way, start helping Jesus give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death (Luke 1:79). Help Jesus give light to us.

We will hear from the grown up John the Baptist in the second reading today. But first Luke gives us the context of John's and Jesus' ministry. I'm not going to go into who all those people were, because that would really sound like mwah, mwah, mwah. But here's what you need to know. All those people, Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas, they all appear in the non-Biblical historical record. They are real people in charge of real places. In big, bold letters, Luke is saying, in *this* particular place, at *this* particular time when *these* particular people were in charge, God stepped in. And not only stepped in. God stepped in again and did something wholly unconnected to any of the possibilities that were on the table at the time.

When we were slaves in Egypt, God stepped in and brought us to the Promised Land, an unimagined dream, a land of our own. When that land was conquered by the Assyrians, who were conquered by the Babylonians, who were conquered by the Persians, the prophet Jeremiah promised that we would return home to Jerusalem, something that no conquered people in captivity should ever have fantasized about. Real people in real places and God steps in and does something outside the realm of possibility.¹

God steps into the world of emperors and governors, of tetrarchs and high priests, and two babies are born in very humble families that no one has heard of. The first baby boy grows up to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins, to preach the preparation for the way of the Lord. How can that be comparable to freedom from slavery, to return from exile? Think about it. That world of emperors and governors, of tetrarchs and high priests was a *quid pro quo* world.²

In the world John the Baptist lives in, here's how it worked. You say something wrong, you do something wrong, you love the wrong person, you fail to deliver on a contract, you misunderstand the contract you're in, your parent or your child makes a bad call, and you're on the hook. If you have resources, you hand them over and the mistake goes away. You don't have resources, or you don't have enough resources, and that one misstep follows you until you die. Or until it kills you. That is a world without grace.³ Who does that work well for? Who has absolutely no interest in changing that world?⁴ The emperors, governors, tetrarchs and high priests.

Into that world without grace, God sends a young man to say, in essence, "Did you make a mistake? Did you take a misstep? O.K. Are you willing to make a turn in your life (that's what the Greek for "repent" literally means, making a sharp turn)? If you are willing to repent, the mistake or the misstep is erased. And not just you. Everybody. All flesh. (Luke 3:6). None of us is left out. We are no better than our enemies, no worse than our detractors.⁵ God sends two young men to argue that we need to rip up all the social systems which run on debt, which run on exchange, and create social systems which rely on grace. That is the light that leads us out of slavery. That is the light leads us home from exile. That is the light that leads us through the crooked and rough places (Luke 3:5).

We watch those two young men, stepping into history at this real place in this real time speaking against these real people who control power. And we get it. We need to support that light. We need to join them in opening up all the new possibilities God has created that were not there before. We need to gather together money, time and love. We need to change the way to speak to each other and to ourselves. We need to reach out to others who haven't been shown the contrast between a world that runs on the exchange of debt and a world that runs on grace. We need to steward that light.

¹ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, "Second Sunday of Advent, Theological Perspective, Luke 3:1-6" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 44 & 46.

² Walter Brueggemann, "Luke 3:1-4." *Interpretation* 30, no. 4 (1976): 406.

³ Brueggemann, 408.

⁴ Brueggemann, 406.

⁵ T Denise Anderson, "Living by the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary [Dec 6, 2015]." *The Christian Century* 132 (25): 21.

Because here's the thing. The emperor, the governor, the tetrarchs and the high priests, they're not going to do it. They like how the quid pro quo world works. How do we know? Because we do too. We know that we like the leverage we have over other people who have made mistakes, taken missteps.⁶ We like being able to set the conditions other people have to meet in order for us to overlook their mistake, their misstep. In a world that runs on grace, the emperors and the governors don't get to make the call about how a mistake is erased. And neither do we.

This unexpected range of possibilities that God opened up in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius is ours to steward. This world that runs on grace instead of exchange, that is world that needs to come into being, and frankly, it would be easier to fill every valley and make every mountain and hill low (Luke 3:5). But we're called to steward the light that comes from bringing a world of grace into being. Not just for the nobodies, the babies born to parents no one has ever heard of, but for the emperors, governors, tetrarchs and high priests too. And for ourselves. We are called to be stewards to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:79)

⁶ Brueggemann, 409.