

December 6 2015

Year B Second Sunday in Advent

Scripture Lessons ~

Luke 1:68-79

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-6

Sermon *The Most Direct Route Between Two Points*

Prior to Jesus' birth, there was a great messianic expectation that a leader would somehow emerge in Israel who would come from the line of King David. The Israelites had been dominated by a long line of foreign powers for centuries and centuries and most recently, of course, by the Romans. Some folks called Zealots expected the messianic leader to be a kind of conquering military general who would free the people from Roman oppression. There were others like the Essenes who perhaps wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls who expected the messiah to be a kind of spiritual leader who would lead the people away from stilted, rigid religious practices to a kind of vibrant spirituality culminating into a kind of Kingdom of God right here with us on earth where God would rule in the midst of the people in a time of great peace. And it was also expected that in some way and in some form the prophet Elijah would come to earth to usher in this messianic leader. You remember in the second chapter of the second book of Kings, Elijah allowed Elisha to take his place and was then taken up in a whirlwind in a fiery chariot, having never really died in the process.

So as in the movies or as in a good book, this story of Elijah is right for a sequel and the sequel comes in the form of John the Baptist, who is a cousin of Jesus. Now John's birth story and background is recorded in almost as much detail as Jesus' birth story in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. And in that chapter we find John's background, excellent in a role as a kind of second Elijah. Both sides of his family were from a priestly past, and he was, as I said before, related to Jesus in some way and somehow perhaps as a cousin. The circumstances of his birth, too are miraculous in good Old Testament form.

And when he comes on the scene in chapter three, the time is right for his arrival into the world as he quotes the words that we heard this morning from the 40th chapter of Isaiah's prophecy. I wanted you to notice something else in this chapter three, what a detailed writer and historian Luke is. He is very interested in placing Jesus' life and ministry in the context of contemporary events. So what do we get? We are able to get information about as to who the emperor was; who the governor was; who the local Jewish rulers are; the name of the high priest; the name of John's father and then something about his sort of quirky ministry. We get

a vision into it, in fact that he is interested in a baptism for the repentance of sin that is something like the ritual washing used when outsiders were converted to Judaism in that day. And then that strange language is quoted again from Isaiah chapter 40. The language in the sermon last week was the language of preparation, which was also, placed as last in Luke chapter 21 the reading for the Advent Season. It is another call for us to be ready; another call for us to be prepared for the arrival of this Christ Child.

But the language is strange to many of us, almost the language that Paul Wilson could relate to better than any of us. The language of the engineer; the language of surveyor; the language of the road builder because it speaks of leveling a valley; it speaks of flattening hills; and it speaks of smoothing rough spots; it speaks especially about straightening that which is crooked or curvy.

And then there is my universal question: what does any of this have to do with Advent? I think my title attempt and what I did with Marshall this morning is a principal of geometry; the principal of trying to find your way around a map. The most direct route between two points is a straight line. Let me repeat, the most direct route between two points is a straight line. I believe it can be applied to preparation for Advent and Christmas as well because it has to do with simplicity, simplicity. Obvious life is not a simple enterprise and sometimes taking that scenic route on a trip is far more preferable than taking the direct route on a freeway but I am not sure that is true when it comes to Advent. Running to and fro; buying food; buying decorations; gifts buying; planning parties; over doing our eating, drinking, and our gift giving is not really what Advent and Christmas is all about, is it? Instead it is about those simple things, those quiet things; those straight paths that John the Baptist speaks of; it is about clearing the slate; it is about getting back to basics. Basics like peace on earth, a much neglected concept in this modern day. Good will to all people and God came to earth as child born in all places in a barn; born in lowly, lowly circumstances, and born to very, very poor parents.

So I guess the message of this passage is, is to get busy, do get ready, do prepare but remember the who and what we prepare for. Make straight the paths of your life simplify for Pete's sake and anticipation in finding the true meaning of this season in those quiet places, places like this little sanctuary in Sunday morning places; places like the bread and the cup which we will soon share as a church family together. Together we say AMEN