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Seeing What Matters

Scripture Introduction: To understand today's Scripture readings we have to go to the beginning of the story that says, "in the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah." (Lk 1:5) who was married to a woman named Elizabeth. Zechariah served as a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem during the time when that part of the world was ruled by Rome. Specifically, Tiberius was the Holy Roman Emperor, and Pontius Pilate and Herod the Great ruled what we now call Israel and Palestine on Rome's behalf. And it happened that Zechariah was just doing his job as a priest when the Angel Gabriel appeared to him in the midst of his daily duties in the Jerusalem Temple. Zechariah had not called on God or asked God for anything, so he was afraid when the Angel appeared to him. And the angel told Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth, though they were old and had no children, would have a son. Gabriel said that they were to name him "John", and that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit, and would call the people back to faithfulness. John's job would be to "prepare the people for the coming of the Lord." (Lk 1:17) Zechariah doubts Gabriel and asks, "How will I know that what you say will happen? Elizabeth and I are both too old!" And as a sign, Gabriel tells Zechariah that he will not be able to speak until it all happens. Because he does not believe that what Gabriel says is true, he is not allowed to speak the truth or tell of what God will do. So, sure enough, Zechariah comes out of the Temple unable to speak. And when the baby is born, the neighbors ask if the baby boy will be named for his father, Zechariah. Elizabeth says and Zechariah confirms in writing, "No, his name is John." And only then, can Zechariah speak again. And this is what Zechariah says:

Luke 1:68-79

Luke 3:1-6

Last week was the first Sunday in Advent. And Advent marks the beginning of the year for Christians. Last Sunday, Dan wished you all "Happy New Year!" for just this reason. Each Advent we get a new start, another beginning. And every Advent we begin again with the promises of God. It is worth noting that, for Christians, the year begins again every year with the promise of Good News – Gospel. The year doesn't ever begin for Christians with woe, despair, fear or anger. Even before Jesus arrives on the scene – long before Jesus arrives on the scene – the message from God is always Good News. And in today's Scripture reading, Zechariah sings a song of praise! *Bless the Lord God of Israel because he has come to help and has delivered his people. He has raised up a mighty savior . . . He has brought salvation from our enemies . . . He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors . . . God has granted that we would be rescued from the power of our enemies so that we could serve God without fear, in*

holiness and righteousness.” Then Zechariah turns and speaks to his newborn son, John. You will be a prophet of the Most High God . . . you will prepare the way before the Lord, and tell God’s people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins. Because of God’s deep compassion or tender mercy, God’s light will break over us like the dawn and we will be led into the way of peace.”

Of course, Tiberius, Pontius Pilate and Herod the Great did not get birth announcements and knew nothing of Gabriel’s appearance or of Zechariah’s wishful/seditious singing.

And when that John, called John the Baptist, came of age, then “the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

Political comings and economic doings continue as usual. The power brokers in the power centers have a good bead on reality and they control what is going to happen by the decisions they make. Tiberius has the ultimate power of life and death in his hands, and Pontius Pilate and Herod fear only Tiberius who has put them in power and by whose strength they remain in their positions of strength. It is government and business who believe they are the center of truth and reality. They are on the inside and know what is going on and are making plans for the future reality. Tiberius is the arbiter of truth, and what he says goes. All other realities, all other truth brokers may be interesting, but the human interest pages of the Rome Tribune are not where the empire looks for truth.

But, look again at Luke, Chapter 3. The way Luke tells of God at work is significant. In the 15th year of Emperor Tiberius, 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 and Annas and Caiaphas were high priests in Jerusalem, the WORD OF GOD CAME TO JOHN, SON OF ZECHARIAH, IN THE WILDERNESS.

Scripture claims a very different truth. We must not miss this amazing thing. When God shows up, when God wants to tell us something, God doesn’t write an Op Ed for the Rome Tribune. When God sends his messenger, it gets announced in the local paper of the Judean hill country, in a town that isn’t even named in Scripture it is so small. And when God means to speak to the world, God speaks to John in the wilderness.

Although the world at large thinks that it knows what really matters, and the political powers jockey for power, the economic pundits pay attention to the economic indices and the military powers track the trends in weapons development, in Advent the people of God say, in order to know what really matters we need to pay attention to the wilderness. Those who believe in the Kingdom of God turn around and look in the opposite direction from all of the political, economic and military powers if we want to see what God is doing.

And every Advent, you and I are given the opportunity to choose again what really matters – to choose again where we look for truth, security and power. We can look to the political, economic and military powers, or we can look to God. And when we choose to look to God for

truth, security and power, then our priorities shift radically. When we choose to look to God for truth, then we are invited to repent and be baptized so that our sin may be forgiven and we may be able to actually hear truth and recognize real power. The Contemporary English Bible says that John “went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins.” (Lk 3:3) And, when we look to God for truth and choose God’s reality as the reality which really matters, then we seek a relationship with God that leads us to humility, a commitment to truth as God sees truth, the power to speak Good News that is for the whole world, and a commitment to peace and joy.

When we recognize the Word of God, proclaimed in the wilderness through the decidedly non-popular John the Baptist, we get NOT national promises, but eternal and worldwide promises. God’s promise to the whole world is that valleys will be filled and hills will be leveled. Crooked paths will be made straight and rough places will be smoothed over so that “all flesh/all humanity will see the salvation of God.” (Lk 3:6)

When we look for truth in Rome and in the local power brokers, then we get things backwards. And then we get swept up in the concerns of those who think they are the brokers of truth. We know we have it backwards when

- we are more concerned with security than we are with peace,
- when we are more concerned to be powerful than we are to recognize God’s power,
- when we are more concerned to preserve our place, power and prestige than we are to humbly seek God’s grace and forgiveness for our brokenness and weakness.
- When we want blessing and honor and salvation to fall only on us and not on all humanity.

This can feel threatening. But hear me clearly. It is not that the state and the centers of military, economic and political power are unimportant. They are important, just not eternal. What really matters is God’s power, God’s truth, God’s ability to save. The best thing we can do for the centers of military, economic and political power is to get this order of allegiance right. When our FIRST citizenship is in the Kingdom of God we will be better equipped both to serve and to hold accountable the powers of this world.

It is the powers of this world who lose their way, who betray the rights of their own citizens, who make mistakes and who serve their own power first.

God does not lose God’s way, betray God’s own children, or make mistakes. It is God who rules the Universe and the Nations and whose purpose is redemption, peace, joy and true life. The only people who think that is bad news are those who think that they are able to do what God alone can do. If we want to know what really matters, if we want to find out what really is eternal and what may be trusted, we must look to the wilderness. We must turn around and look away from Rome and towards the wilderness region of the Jordan and in humility listen for the Word of God. If we want to know what really matters, we must acknowledge that it will not be found in the centers of power recognized by this world. Scripture says that we have a better

chance of finding what really matters if we hang out in the wilderness rather than in the palace, in the stable rather than in the hotel, and in church rather than in 24/7 Newsland.

The promise of this new year in Christ – and the promise of every new year in Christ is that light is coming, peace is coming, God is coming – no matter what the economic, military or political powers say – that God is coming is what really matters. We each get the opportunity to decide again for ourselves, what really matters.

Holy Advent to you all!