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Sermon – Luke 3:1-6
December 9, 2018

This sermon was written with the help of The New Testament, Dennis C. Duling

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

For most of us, this is not our first time through the Advent season. We hear the stories every year, and the language washes over our ears and our hearts. Are there any words or ideas that even after all this time you've never understood? Is there any language that never made sense? Or characters that have always been a mystery? I don't think I'm quite brave enough yet to do an "ask the minister" sermon, but I would love to hear your queries after church or during the week.

I've actively participated in about 30 seasons of Advent in my life, and for much of that time I had nagging questions, like who is King David – why do I care about him in the context of Jesus' birth? Who is Jesse, and what is this stump they're always talking about? For me, it's all people, who are these people? . . . also, King Herod, who is that guy? Why is he so against Jesus and afraid of losing his power? Herod, we're actually going to stop and talk about, because his sons are included in this long list of rulers who were in power when John the Baptist started his ministry. These are historical people, so by naming each of them, Luke is helping us pinpoint the period of time in which these things happened. These guys wouldn't have been happy to know Luke was using them in this way, and yet here they are, associated with John and Jesus until the end of time. So, why are these guys so worried about losing their power? Why do they have such fragile egos? The history is complicated, but suffice it to say, Herod the Great, through his connections with Rome is able to secure for himself the title of King over the a large region, including Judea, Samaria, Galilee. "The Great" must be more of a title than an actual description of his life as a ruler, because he burdens people with taxes to pay for his ambitious building projects, making him unpopular with the people; he also has too many wives and is plagued with domestic problems. He is only "king" because of his connections with Rome, and he is going to fight to keep his status. In Matthew's gospel, Herod is frightened at the news of Jesus' birth and sets his mind to

destroying him. Matthew tells us that meanwhile, God sends a messenger to tell Joseph to take the family to Egypt; they are to leave their home and enter a new land as refugees . . . a land where Jesus' own people lived in slavery, aching for deliverance. Herod dies a couple of years later, unloved and unmourned, but his sons are more than happy to step into his shoes.¹ His kingdom is divided between them, and each is given status lower than their father's, though Archelaus (Arch-eh-lus) is for a while given a bit more status than his brothers, until his subjects revolt and he is dismissed and banished. Herod Antipas becomes the tetrarch of Galilee and some other areas, including a long stretch along the east side of the River Jordan, where it is possible for him to observe John's ministry. Again, these brothers are in these positions of power for no other reason than their father had connections with Rome and the emperor is generous enough to let them rule, as long as they are reasonably competent at it. They are given a gift of extremely high status in society, nearly the highest status one can have under the emperor, but it's empty . . . none of it is based on their character or wisdom or achievements. It is all given to them through their father's connections. They have all the status in the world to lose if this gig doesn't pan out, so they are ruthless and dangerous.

Come with me even deeper into this world – it gives us a window into how the Jesus story developed as it did. Outside their opulent palaces is the culture into which Jesus is born: an agrarian or peasant society, focused mainly on farming, but also fishing; second or third sons who do not inherit land eke out their living as artisans, though some become impoverished and turned begging and thievery, making them impure and living on the margins.² The tetrarchs go around to the farms and round up their excess harvest. Sometimes land owners lose their land altogether due to over-taxation, and live on the land as tenants paying rent to urban aristocrats. Underneath this lot in life is the belief that the “good things” in life – land, possessions, wealth, power, privilege, prestige, status, honour, friendship, love – are in limited supply. Not only are the people living in a state of suffering, there is little hope, because there isn't enough good to go around. Listen to that against the message of the

¹ The New Testament, Dennis C. Duling, p. 15

² Duling, 16

gospel, where there is more than enough life, healing, and transformation for all. It seems the only thing they have going for them is whatever honour they have, and that could fluctuate with unforeseen circumstances. For the vast majority of the people, it is a hand to mouth existence. There are razor thin margins because they are overtaxed, there is nothing extra because the rulers take their extra crops, and the honour of the family is directly related to how well they were doing in life.

With the constant presence of Roman soldiers in the area, there looms perpetual danger. Roman citizens don't need to worry about conflicts with soldiers, but Israelites and Samaritans alike are extremely cautious of them. The crucifix isn't invented for the execution of Jesus, rather these forms are commonly seen on the street and in public places, ready to not only put someone to death but do it through the ultimate humiliation. I imagine life under these conditions would be a little like being an undocumented worker in the US, living in a low level of panic every day, wondering if ICE is going to find you. It is a world where the powerful strategically assert themselves to get a reaction from the oppressed, and those rising up (and they did rise up, particularly as Herod's sons were taking over) have to be willing to lose their lives for the sake of a better one. By the time John, son of Zechariah, who will become known as John the Baptist, comes on the scene, Rome has ruled for 100 years; devout Jews are looking for a new word from God and only have a sketchy idea of what it will look like.³

The people have been handed their place in life; they are hardened, exhausted, untrusting, frightened, sick & hurt, resentful, grieving, perhaps some devout Jews live in Qavah, in that tension of expectation that God will act . . . then John calls out in the wilderness, "prepare the way of the Lord," and everyone turns to look. Who is ready for a saviour? Who is ready to be delivered from suffering, like the Israelites coming out of slavery in Egypt? Your way will be made easier, he says, but you need to prepare yourselves, because this is no ordinary gift. Crowds of people hear John's call and boy are they ready to listen.⁴ For some of us John baptizing in the Jordan is the first we hear of this ritual, but it is actually used in Judaism as a ritual practice of full submersion for those converting to the faith. The

³ NT Wright, Luke, p. 32

⁴ Wright, 32.

prophet Ezekiel says, "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean,"⁵ Akiba, in the second century said, "Blessed art thou, O Israel! Before whom dost thou cleanse thyself? and who cleanses thee? Thy Father in heaven!" Accordingly, in Judaism, Baptism is not merely for the purpose of redeeming a special transgression, but it is to form us in holy living, and to prepare us for the day we are able to reach a closer communion with God.⁶ When John calls people in the wilderness to Baptism, this is what people hear: this is formation and preparation for closer communion with God. But it won't be as simple as a ritual; John requires us to examine ourselves, the state of our hearts, the state of our Shalom, our wholeness, to bear the light of self-honesty and repent . . . this is one of those words that grates against some of us, but what it really means in Biblical terms is to change one's mind. In our self-examination, John invites us to examine ourselves, our choices, our lives, our relationships, our work, our faith, and asks, upon reflection, do you stand behind who you are and how you've behaved, or are there some things you need to change? What has been nagging at you or what has caused you to shut down, close your heart, push someone away? Was that the right choice, maybe it was for then; is it still the right choice? John is calling people to repentance, but it is also a gift to not have to live with regrets of the past and to be ritually made ready for a closer relationship with God. The time has come, and the people are ready for John's call to prepare for this holy birth.

⁵ Ezekiel 36:25

⁶ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2456-baptism>, Dec 8, 2018