

The Gospel of Luke

Luke 9. 7-9 | January 3, 2021

From Waiting to Seeing

Happy New Year. I heard someone joke recently that they couldn't wait for New Year's Day 2021 to arrive, because then they could finally say that hindsight really is 2020. I'm not sure what you saw in 2020, no doubt there were some challenging days, but here we are together!

There are two kinds of people this time of year. Those who have packed up Christmas and those who haven't. You can see our church is still a little decorated for Christmas, and there is a reason for that beyond sheer laziness. We're still a little decorated for Christmas because of the roots of that song, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. Historically Christmas wasn't over in a flash, but was a feast lasting almost two weeks. So, apologies to those who've packed up the decorations and swept the house – you may have moved on a little early. And to those who think they're lazy and behind, still gorging yourself on leftovers and chocolate, you'll be happy to know you're right on schedule.

But you know, the seasons do give us some sense of helpful structure in these strange days. *Advent* was the season of *waiting* for the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, as we still wait for his return. *Christmas* is the feast in celebration of Jesus' appearing, a Jesus who is with us by his Spirit today. And following Christmas comes *Epiphany*, a season which focuses on seeing Jesus clearly, a time we invite one another to really take Jesus in. So this time of year, whether Christmas is packed up or not, is still all about moving from *waiting*, to *receiving*, and then to *seeing*. And like the magi (or wise men) who saw the star in the East and came looking, Jesus came for everyone to see God.

So I think this time of year asks us, *who do we need to keep an eye on? Who is worthy of our focus in order to ground and shape our lives in the year ahead?* And so it's entirely appropriate we pick up the *Gospel of Luke* together in order to catch a good glimpse of the character at the center of the seasons we've been observing. And we pick up today where we left off back in November, in Luke 9, not with a baby Jesus, but with a grown-up Jesus sharing good news about God wherever he goes.

Herod's Question

In a way this little aside from St. Luke pulls together the whole journey from Advent to Epiphany; from John the Baptist's heralding of Jesus' arrival, to Jesus himself standing among us. But these few verses give us a *very different* perspective of Jesus among us. Not Mary's perspective, or a shepherd's perspective, but the perspective of a man named Herod Antipas. Now admittedly, Herod is an odd character to kick off the new year with. Who was Herod Antipas? To put it simply, not a very sympathetic character. His father was known as Herod the Great, who we meet in the Gospel of Matthew in his telling of the Christmas story. Herod the Great was the king who tried to snuff Jesus out before he grew up, responsible for a massacre of infants in and around Bethlehem. Herod Antipas was his son, and an apple who didn't fall too far from the rotten tree, a self-interested and brutal puppet king whom the Roman empire used to stabilize the region of Galilee where Jesus' lived most of his life.

As cousins, both John the Baptist and Jesus had choice words for Herod, which is why they both end up on the wrong side of him. John loses his head over criticizing Herod publicly, and Jesus himself doesn't find much favour with Herod when facing his own trial and death. Speaking truth to power was as perilous then as it still is today in many places in the world. Herod Antipas and his father were the kinds of people Jesus was talking about when he called his disciples together and said, *"You know that the rulers in this world lord it over*

their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant... (Matthew 20). Looking back at him as a historical figure, Herod doesn't have a many redeeming qualities. In this passage his interest in Jesus is probably part curiosity, and part political self-preservation. *Who is this Galilean gaining a following, and what does that mean for me and my power?* – he wondered.

But, even though Herod doesn't have many redeeming qualities, he does ask a load-bearing question in the Gospel of Luke; maybe even a *redeeming question* for us to consider this first Sunday of 2021.

Herod is confused about this character who has been drawing large crowds and working miracles. Stories were circulating that John the Baptist, whom Herod had killed, was back from the dead to haunt him. Or that this figure was another prophet from Israel's history, like Elijah, a prophet very much connected with God's return to his people. But Luke makes that bracingly clear point that Herod had crossed John the Baptist off the list as he was pretty sure this new figure wasn't John, since he'd already had John beheaded. So Herod concludes by asking, and this is the redeeming question I mentioned, *"who is this man about whom I hear such stories?"* and Luke adds, *"and he kept trying to see him."*

As nasty as Herod is, he still asks the question which so many do in the Gospel of Luke. It's a question right at the heart of the story on which the entire Christian faith hinges. *Who is Jesus, really?* And even if Herod's hopes of seeing Jesus were shady at best, his craning of the neck in this little passage in Luke is the same craning of the neck that so many characters in the gospels do when Jesus turns up. They hear of Jesus, or see him from a distance, and they know there's something strange and important about him. Most of characters we meet in the gospels ask that question in one way or another: *"Who is this person, this character who won't fit into our boxes and challenges our vision of life?"*

And that's why I think Herod's question is a redeeming one, in that we *can and must* ask that question ourselves if we are to take faith seriously. All four of Jesus' biographers (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) wrote so that we *would* ask that question today too. And in the Gospel of Luke especially this is a point we really can't miss. Jesus has come into the world, for *absolutely everyone*; meaning we're all faced with the Jesus question. Young women, old men, shepherds, Jews, Roman officials, puppet kings, the religious, the irreligious, crooks, goodie-two-shoes, insiders, outsiders – everyone. And that invitation to everyone is as important and staggering now and it was when Herod asked his question then. Renowned historian Jaroslav Pelikan writes:

“Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of western culture for almost twenty centuries... It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray.”

At the end of the day, the central character to the Christian faith - and indeed western culture as Pelikan points out - is Jesus. So unless we're willing to stare Jesus in the face as God come among us, and all the messy implications that carries, we'll only ever end up with empty religious rituals and tired self-interest. A Christian faith without Jesus in the middle of it is about as much use as a chocolate frying pan. Jesus makes the difference for everyone. He's the character we simply can't avoid, asking us questions, drawing us deeper into the knowledge of God and a new vision of what it means to be human.

For everyone to see

The temptation is Christmas is to get *too* sentimental about it; to look in the manger and to think: *oh, isn't the baby sweet; isn't God so nice to have sent us a friend like Jesus so we don't feel so lonely; maybe a friend who'll bring us a gift now and then if we ask nicely.* Maybe the danger at Christmas is to domesticate God, reducing the baby in the manger to the kind of character we might

create from our own imaginings. The niceness some place on Jesus at a historical distance can distract us from *his necessity* to life itself. Ironically, this misses the whole point of the mystery and power of the Christmas story. The point is that though this baby is both *with* us and *like* us, which is of course a comfort, this baby is also somehow immensely unique and different from us. The point of Christmas is the revealing of a character who's emergence into the world changes things forever.

So the question Herod asks, of course with some self-interested anxiety, really is *the* question. And it's a question that each of us are inevitably faced with if we begin a life of faith, and a question we'll ask over again on the long road of apprenticeship with Jesus. And I would go so far as to say that if we were to ask *only one* question as a people interested in faith at the beginning of a new year, this would be the one to ask. *Who is Jesus? And what about him is so special that scripture and history relentlessly push him to the foreground?* Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus himself asks his friends that same question at crucial moments in their time with him: "*who do you say that I am?*" (Matthew 16). And in a way, Herod's action, admittedly taken a little out of context, is a natural action to take as followers of Jesus or question askers of Jesus today. Luke tells us that "*Herod kept trying to see him.*"

Jesus and _____.

The message of the Advent, Christmas and Epiphany seasons collectively is that the revelation of God is in the person of Jesus. Jesus shows us what God's like. So our commitment to Jesus' centrality in our lives, no matter the competing voices or characters, including our own voices, is absolutely vital for life with the real God. As Jesus himself says in John's gospel, "*No one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14). And a little earlier, "*If you have seen me, you have seen the Father*" (John 14). I think that effort in getting clear on Jesus, of inviting him into our vision and hearts, will lead us to discover depth and purpose

beyond what we might have at first imagined. So our invitation at the beginning of this new year, a year in which we'll no doubt face uncertainty and challenge, is as simple and yet as essential as ever. Our invitation to one another is to a *radical curiosity about Jesus*, where we let go of our assumptions, and allow his character and message to ground and shape our lives.

I've began a little ritual, where I chose a word for the year. I'd heard of people doing it before and thought I'd give it a try. The idea is to choose a word to wrestle with for the whole year. And I can say the word I chose for 2020 wasn't one I exhausted in that time. In fact, I feel at the beginning of this year an invitation to extend that word into 2021 – there's more to wrestled with, more to learn from in that word (won't tell you, get your own). Whether we practice resolution making, word choosing or some other ritual to mark a new year, none of those resolutions, none of those words can supersede God's Word spoken through the life of Jesus among us; the one whom John calls "*the Word made flesh*"; the Word living in us now through the Holy Spirit. So this year I've adapted my very new tradition. I've selected a word, but I'm also going to ensure that my vision of Jesus is always along-side it, shaping me. Jesus and _____. And that's because I never want to stop asking that crucial question, "*who is this character to whom I'm so drawn?*" and take that action of *trying to see him*. So I could ask you, *what's your word for 2021?* That's a good question. But "*Who is Jesus?*" is the best possible question we can ask if we're hoping for life to the fullest. So let's choose our words, filling in the blanks. But this year, let's not diminish the life the Word who has already chosen us. "*I am the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end...I am the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come—the Almighty One.*" (Revelation 1) Bless you, HNY.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did the recent teach you about the depth of God that you hadn't seen before?
2. Why is a radical curiosity about Jesus vital if we apprentice with Jesus?
3. How could you see Jesus becoming more central to your vision in 2021