

Philippians 1:3-11

God's Peace

Luke 3:1-6

December 8, 2024

According to Luke 3, it was in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar; when Pontius Pilate was Governor of Judea; Herod, Tetrarch of Galilee (his name was Antipas); his brother Philip, the Tetrarch of Iturea and Traconiti; Lysanias, Tetrarch of Abilene - during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas - that the Word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert - and there the story proper begins.

The focus of attention in the time of Advent is the pre-story; the creation of the world, the history of the nation of Israel with its golden age and later decline and fall, the age of the Israelite prophets right up to the birth of John to Zechariah and Elizabeth; and by extension right up to the point where the one who is called John the Baptist enters the stage of history for a brief time. All of that is Advent . . .

It was clear in the minds of the earliest believers that John was foretold by the prophet Isaiah, in the great text from the 40th chapter. The chapter that ends,

“They shall mount up on wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint,” also begins, “Comfort, comfort my people, ‘says your God,’ “speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her

sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins . . .”

And then the part in Luke 3, but as it appears in Isaiah;

“A voice of one calling:

‘In the wilderness prepare

the way for the Lord;

make straight in the desert

a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be raised up,

every mountain and hill made low;

the rough ground shall become level,

the rugged places a plain.

5 And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,

and all people will see it together.’

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

And what majesty it is! But in Luke it is down-to-earth. It happened in history when Tiberius was the Emperor in Rome, among people who really lived and died and governed and suffered and served and sinned and triumphed and failed. We are given the names of people and places that help us know where all this happened and when.

But there was nothing great to see here, just a poorly dressed religious seer, preaching out in the wilderness messages of repentance unto forgiveness; a man eventually taken down rather easily by the son of Herod the Great, and after that Jesus himself came preaching, “the kingdom of God is at hand.”

It is not only the Resurrection of Jesus that marks the victory of the Kingdom of God, but also the cross itself. And it is not only the cross, but also the teaching of Jesus, and the ministry of healing and helping, and the casting of demons and the raising of the dead.

And it is not only the life and teaching of Jesus that, in addition to the cross and resurrection stands for the victory of good over evil, life over death, and love over all the distortions of life that meet us in the world, but also the *birth*, the Incarnation itself.

And this birth was spoken beforehand so that even the decision of God before the foundation of the world is a mark of the eternal kingdom that is the source of redemption and reconciliation, which we anticipate. The name of the anticipation of that eternal kingdom is Advent. It stands not only for the historical arrival on the stage of history of John the forerunner and Jesus the Messiah, but also for the salvation they proclaimed; the hope and the peace, and the joy and the love that serve as Advent themes.

The theme of the day is peace. It refers to an inner peace like Paul mentioned in the 4th chapter of Philippians, “the peace of God that surpasses understanding,” and is a promise of a more comprehensive peace, one to all people in the world, that characterizes life under God.

Clearly the world into which John came, and later Jesus, was not a world of divine peace. The Peace of

Rome, as it has been called, was a mandatory peace that did not actually make a peaceful world but by force covered over a world of hardship and distress, and simmering unrest that remains to this day.

But the peace of God *is* in the world because it was in Jesus, and Jesus is in us, and we are in the world. It is a promise of things to come when God’s Kingdom arrives in its fulness - so that we experience in the present a peaceful resolve that guides us through whatever is happening in our lives or whatever is happening in the world.

One example of such peace is told in the story of Dietrich Boenhoffer, a World War 2 era German pastor who stood against the Nazi regime in the 1930s and 40s. His story is well-known and is the subject of a new movie out just recently, about his life and death, which came at the hands of prison guards right near the end of the war.

Part of the story involves his steady faithfulness in the prison near the end, when they were being bombed by the allies and many of the other inmates and even the guards were unable manage their anxieties, which is a polite way of saying that they were breaking down, and they sought him because he was a source of calm the storm. When everyone else was going to pieces, was able to hold together. He wrote the following poem about his experience, I am intrigued by the difference between what others saw in him, and how he felt;

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house.
Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were *mine* to command.
Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were
compressing my throat,
yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
trembling with anger at despotism and petty
humiliation,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite
distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?
Who am I? This or the other?

Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone
weakling?

Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from a victory already achieved?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of
mine.

Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

It was the same with Jesus, the peace of Christ, the
peace of God. They say at the end he sweated drops
of blood, but did not speak before his accusers, and
forgave them. It is the same with us, for we know that
we also *belong to God*. That is what the coming of
Christ reveals; what the message in the wilderness
proclaims. Along with our hope, God's peace is what
we have been waiting for, and it is born into the world
along with the holy child. Let it also be in your heart.

So let this prayer be our own, which we receive from
Paul in Philippians;

“May your love abound more and more in the
knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be
able to discern what is best and may be pure and
blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of
righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to
the glory and praise of God.” Amen.

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