

Sermon for Sunday, December 9, 2018 - "Where to Look"

Second Sunday of Advent
December 9, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The Bible is full of names of people that don't really mean much to us - lots of genealogies and rulers of old. Ten different rulers appear in just the first three chapters of Luke's Gospel as we hear the stories about the births of John the Baptist and Jesus and the beginning of John's ministry. I usually skim over these names to try to get to the main point. So, King Herod was ruler when John was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth, fine; but get to the part about a child being born to parents who'd given up hope. Yeah, there was Emperor Augustus who decreed all the world should be registered - he got Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. And apparently some guy named Quirinius was governor of Syria. But those feel like minor details compared to the Son of God lying in a manger. They serve to establish the setting and the time frame.

Except, when we get to our reading today from chapter 3, Luke names quite a few more rulers than would really be necessary to locate a story in history. Do we really need to know that John started preaching when Herod was ruler of one place and his brother Philip ruler of another and Lysanias still another?

Yes, because Luke's making a larger point. It seems he wants us to have these powerful people in mind when we hear the stories of insignificant, ordinary people like Zechariah, Elizabeth, John, Mary and Joseph. Luke wants to say, even though the world tells you that these high and mighty people are so very important, you should look elsewhere - you should look at these folks.

That's a pretty bold claim by Luke.

These rulers that we now gloss over were earthshakers with incredible power. Their lives, their decisions impacted everyone.

Back in Luke's day, it would be ludicrous to think that Emperor Augustus or Quirinius is just a minor detail, backdrop to the story of a peasant child being born. It would be crazy to talk about Emperor Tiberius and Pontius Pilate in the same breath as the small-town priest Zechariah and his son John.

But that's just what Luke does in our passage today.

He names seven Very Important People who have seven Very Important Titles and then John, son of Zechariah, all in the same sentence. John is a wild-eyed prophet, living in the wilderness, whose only title is son of another minor player. Luke then goes even further. He not only mentions John alongside these rulers but asserts that the word of the Lord came to him - to him and not to the high and mighty.

The Roman Emperors claimed to be the sons of God, to rule with God's authority. Herod and the high priests claimed to speak for God. And yet the word of God came not to them but to a guy named John, a nobody, the son of a nobody, in the wilderness.

In telling the story this way, contrasting a nobody with all these rulers, Luke is telling us something about what God is up to.

God, in Jesus, is turning the world upside down - toppling the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. Those who are high up on a lofty mountain perch are being taken down a notch or more, as those laid low in deep valleys are raised up.

This is the promise. This is what God is up to in Jesus.

Yet it can be hard to see this happening. In those days of emperors and kings, and in our day, it can be hard to see what God is doing.

These days, our lives are filled with the news of the very rich and the very powerful. Strong-man leaders, tech giants, corporate CEOs, and big money lobbyists may not have quite as much power as Caesar Augustus, but they wield so much influence in our government, the world, the global economy. Their voices are amplified, their interests are advanced.

It would be easy to fixate on them and all the news about them. It would be easy to despair for our world as the gap between the rich and poor continues to grow.

So, Luke directs our attention elsewhere. Luke lifts up the stories of small, seemingly insignificant people to say this is how God comes, this is what God does to turn the world around.

God works through babies, childless couples, unwed teenage mothers, wild-eyed prophets, itinerant preachers and executed criminals. God's mercy comes disguised in human weakness. Two vulnerable children, John and Jesus, grow up to change the world. The cross, an instrument of Roman torture, becomes the means by which God reconciles the world to God's own self. This is how God works. And God's not done yet. God continues to work through unlikely characters today, through you and me, to turn the world around.

God gives us the same world-changing power that John was given - that is the Word of the Lord. The Word of challenge and promise changes things. The Word convicts us when we get high and mighty and raises us up when we are low. The Word calls us to repent, to turn towards God and straighten the crooked paths in our own lives. The Word brings forgiveness, that is release, so that we can join in God's work.

God's Word empowers us to raise our voices for the sake of God's justice and mercy the way John did. God's Word assures us that God is at work, even when we can't see it, and promises that one day all flesh will see God's salvation.

We may not be VIPs, we may not be the earthshakers of our day, but we have a world-changing gift. We have what we need to be part of God's work of turning the world around.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

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