

Advent II, December 9, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Malachi 3:1-4, Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6

In the second year of the administration of President Donald, when Jay was Governor of Washington, and Norma & Dave were 10th District State Representatives, during the episcopate of Greg.....

If you read that ten years from now, you'd know it's referring to 2018!

So if you re-read the opening of today's gospel, you can see what it's intended to do: establish a date. Tiberius became Emperor in 14 A.D. – so the passage refers to his fifteenth year then Luke's talking about 28 to 29 A.D. Now you have some context. You need more. The invitation Luke is issuing is to ask a question: “what was happening, around 28 - 29 A.D.?”

Pilate was 3 years into his ten year reign as Prefect, so he's reached the end of any “honeymoon” period. He's been around long enough to know now that he doesn't have enough troops to keep the Roman peace so he's probably a little nervous about any suggestion of the local populace being unsettled, any demonstrations, any “disturbances.” Watch out for local leaders, he was obviously thinking, they can be dangerous. Take care of the leaders! Buy them off....or kill them. By now – for exactly this reason – Pilate was refreshing Jewish memory about Roman brutality.

Caiaphas was ten years into his twenty year High Priesthood. He, too, knew that the people weren't happy. Why? Taxes! In 6 A.D. the-then Prefect – Quinarius – introduced the first tax census - if you want to collect taxes, you need to know what – and thus who – is around for you to tax. In the years that followed taxes were not simply introduced but also increased by the Empire. Even so, outside of taxes, Jews living in this Roman province maintained some form of independence, including being able to judge offenders by their own laws, including capital offenses.

But as is often the case in Authoritarian systems, the continually increasing taxation hit the ordinary Jew particularly hard, and led to the appearance of resistance groups opposed to Roman occupation, and particularly to Roman taxes, such as the Zealots (remember, Simon – one of Jesus' disciples – was called “The Zealot.”). While the unrest started with taxes, it spread into broader issues, including revolution, leading to the 1st and 2nd Jewish revolts. If you remember the Townshend Tariffs, the Stamp Tax, or the Tea Tax, and how that birthed a broader revolutionary movement, you understand what was happening in Palestine in 28 A.D. For that matter, look at what's happening in France right now: the Yellow Jackets started out opposing a gasoline tax, now they're attacking what they perceive to be an unfair tax structure where the rich get richer and the poor can't afford to buy food.

Sometime around 28 C.E. the ability of Jews to judge offenders by Jewish Law was taken away by the Empire. It seems likely that it was in response to the increasingly violent civil unrest throughout the Empire. For example, in this year, one of the Germanic tribes under Roman domination in what is present-day Holland (the Frisii) hanged their Roman tax collectors and expelled the governor! 300 years later the Romans engaged in Ethnic Cleansing in Holland and

resettled the Frisii survivors as slaves in Kent, south-west of London. So for many of us, the Frisii rank among our ancestors. Revolution runs rich and red in American veins for a reason!

When violence against tax collectors happens, Authoritarian regimes look to create visible examples to frighten the populace into submission. Anyone who was perceived by any Empire to be a potential or actual symbol for revolt was – and is – always dealt with extremely harshly, almost always violently, especially anyone who might claim to represent the people’s desire to live under a different system of governance. Like, say, the Kingdom of God.

On that basis, you should not be surprised that many scholars are now saying that Jesus was likely crucified 28 - 29 A.D.

All of which is to say that 28-29 A.D. – the time Luke identifies in today’s Gospel – was a time of significant unrest within the Empire as a whole, and in it’s Judean province in particular. There was a great deal of uncertainty; the world was changing; it was a scary, frightening, dangerous time. Who knew what the future held?! **Doesn’t today feel like that?!**

Here’s the thing: we and they are not the only ones who have or are experiencing turbulent, dangerous, frightening times in human history. Over and over again, it’s proven possible to identify patterns within the historical record that can teach us. And while the troughs humanity falls into can be deep, we have always soared even higher afterward. That’s a recognition in which we can invest real hope, a recognition that offers comfort: this has happened before, and if it has then we can learn from it, survive it, and flourish again.

That’s only true if we also recognize the urgent prodding that’s in this moment. We haven’t proven great at learning from our past, which is why American historian George Santayana’s 1905 comment about learning from the past that I recently quoted is so compelling: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

So we come to Malachi. In case you miss the point of that name – Malachi – in Hebrew it means “God’s Messenger” – which demands attention to what the book contains! The contents – that message – was issued in response to Malachi’s careful study of Israelite history, and his clear perception that Judah had violated the Covenant with God. Actions have consequences. Now Malachi proclaims, one is to come who will act to wash away, to make clean the dark and dirty ways in which some had chosen to act – and which some in our world have always chosen, and continue to choose to act – toward other human beings, our creation, and God. That behavior sullies and makes dirty the container that holds it: each one of us who behaves in that way. Now the Holy One will refine that behavior and those who exhibit it in the way that impurities are refined – removed – from precious metals (because that’s what we are: precious, to ourselves, each other, and to God). We have nothing to fear if we live in the light, even as we’re surrounded by darkness.

Today’s gospel presents John the Baptist as someone who also remembered the past, saw its consequences in the present, and projected the likely results for and in the future, in the light of the faith that was in him.

His judgment was more sweeping than Malachi's: that the whole history of the Chosen People was marked by one constant fall on their communal face after another (which I believe is a metaphor for all of human history). Only in recognizing why they fell, and changed the way they were living ("repented and returned to the Lord") – only when they learned from their mistakes, would all be restored to wholeness.

Both Malachi and John have displayed for us the ability to recognize that the culture in which they lived was – in real time – coming to another of those turning points where it might slip down into a trough – fall on its face – that their separate cultures had perhaps already done so and risked falling further. They could see what could happen and they were yelling that news clearly, loudly, and with emphasis, in the hope that people would listen and would do something to retrieve the situation before it got any worse.

These two prophets found themselves at different points on history's great arc, but they were both saying the same thing about it. We really need to listen for ourselves to what they're saying: that human beings – we – will always and continually experience ups and downs, and the less we pay attention to the 'downs' and what caused them the deeper those downs will be. When you see the bridge is out you put on the breaks, you don't continue driving as if nothing is wrong!

History, and our faith call out to us to act to make the troughs more shallow, so that the peaks – when they come, and they will come – will be higher and more majestic.

And perhaps here another metaphor is even more appropriate in offering us some encouragement in our work: if human history has sometimes seemed to be taking one step forward, then two or three back, it's long span has never seen that negative pattern as normative; down the millennia we *have* moved toward a more egalitarian, inclusive world, even if slowly. That's good news.

But nothing stays in stasis – or at least, the only things that do so are dead. Stepping back and doing nothing is a recipe for disaster. The price of positive progress – like freedom – is eternal vigilance, and not just vigilance but action, action for good, action for what is just, action for what is right, action on behalf of all, for all, always.....everything must be in response to a recognition of the sorts of times we live in and what we can do to heal them, make them better, cleaner, brighter, whole.

Only then will all flesh see the salvation of God in its fullness.,