

SERMON: DECEMBER 9, 2012

[Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6]
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PRAYER: Send out your light and your truth, O Lord; let them lead us; let them bring us to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Amen.

INTRODUCTION: The year was 1985 and I was a newly minted Ph.D; but, I did not have a teaching position! I still had a family to support and so I fell back on what I could do to make money: paint and hang wallpaper. Two experiences from that year stand out in my memory. The first involved a woman I shall call "Mrs. Dodge". She lived in a mansion in Bel Air, which, as you no doubt know, is a wealthy community next to Hollywood. Mrs. Dodge had a servant, a woman of color, who lived in an apartment over the garage. I recall vividly overhearing the servant's responses to various orders from Mrs. Dodge: "Yes, Mrs. Dodge." "Very well, Mrs. Dodge." "Very good, Mrs. Dodge." "Right away, Mrs. Dodge." It was clear that Mrs. Dodge and her servant lived in two different worlds.

The second experience occurred in another wealthy neighborhood outside Los Angeles, San Marino. We were re-decorating a house that had recently been purchased by the vice-president of a large U.S. bank. His wife was directing our work and it was clear to all of us that we were considerably beneath her in the social order. To put it bluntly, she treated us like dirt; but at least we were all treated the same! *Until...* one day—and I don't know how she found out—she said to me, "I understand you have a degree from Princeton?" "Yes," I said, "in New Testament from Princeton Seminary." Then she went on in a very confiding way about her son who was attending an Ivy League school. Later, I overheard her in the next room talking on the phone to one of her friends. "You won't believe me," I heard her say. "I have a *Ph.D.* hanging wall paper in my dining room!" In her mind, I was "out of place": I did not belong among people working with their hands. From that time on, she treated me with courtesy and respect, while she continued to treat the rest of the crew like dirt. Two different worlds, two different realities existing side-by-side.

SERMON: All four of our scripture lessons this morning also speak of two different realities, two opposing, two competing ways of thinking and living. Each of these Scriptures deserves close study during Advent; but I want to focus on Luke this morning. How does Luke describe these two different realities? How do these realities relate to each other? And, so what? Why should we care?

According to Luke, his world is living by one definition of reality when John the Baptist appears in the wilderness and announces the dawn of a new reality: the advent of the King of Kings, the beginning of the Reign of God. This new reality is, in fact, something old, but now appearing in a new form. The new reality announced by John and symbolized by his baptism fulfills a long series of prophecies by people like Malachi and Isaiah about the coming Day of the Lord when God will redeem all of creation. More than this, what is new keeps the promises God made, stretching all the way back to Abraham, the founding father of the people of God. So sings Zechariah in his song at John's birth: "[The Lord God] promised to show mercy to our fathers and to remember

his holy covenant. This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham, to set us free from the hands of our enemies.” [Luke 1:72-73]

Now, in the first two verses of our Gospel, Luke makes a new point about this fulfillment of promises and prophecies. You may have noticed how carefully Luke situates the wilderness appearance of John within the history of his time: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, ...Philip ruler in Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas”. [Luke 3:1-2a] These notices can be understood simply as an historical convention which Luke followed like any good Hellenistic historian of his day. His point, then, is that this new thing God is doing is “not done in a corner”, but in full public view.

Yes, this is true; but Luke has something more in mind. Luke wants his hearers and readers to understand this: the current world view represented by the Emperor, the Governor, and the Rulers, including the religious rulers, is now being challenged and opposed by the word of God announced by John and embodied in Jesus. This word of God will establish a new reality which will be the undoing of the worldly reality of the rulers of John’s day. So, Luke sees two different worlds, two different realities, and they are in inevitable conflict.

Now, the work of Walter Brueggemann, whom some of you know, has helped me see this conflict even more clearly. Luke locates the new thing God is doing in John and Jesus, not only in the history of Israel, but also in the history of the power elite of his time, both political and religious. Among them, also, this new deed of God is about to break forth! The imminent Day of the Lord affects everyone, including those leaders whom Brueggemann calls “the definers of reality”. John and Jesus, two unknown children of promise, are located among these “definers of reality”. The question is the extent to which John and Jesus will condone the elite definition of reality and in what ways John and Jesus articulate a different definition of reality.

It is instructive to look at the reality embraced by this power elite as described by Luke throughout his Gospel. Already in verse one of our Gospel lesson we learn that the power elite preside over the major institutions of their time. They determine what values are to be embraced and they decree who is inside and who is outside. In fact, there are a very few insiders in contrast to a multitude of outsiders. But, according to Luke, both John and Jesus are concerned especially for the outsiders: the poor, women, Samaritans, lepers, the disabled, those who lack credentials. The power elite have supreme confidence in their own pedigrees. In Luke 3:8, John warns even his own people not to say, “We have Abraham as our ancestor.” Luke makes very clear what is at stake in this conflict: the power elite are prepared to go to great lengths to keep this new word of God from being spoken: Herod has John thrown in prison and he is eventually beheaded [3:18-20] and the religious leaders look for a way to kill Jesus [19:47-48] and finally have him crucified. The world described by Luke is deeply polarized between those who are open to newness and those who resist it: the outsiders—tax collectors and sinners—are baptized; but the insiders—the Pharisees—refuse John’s baptism. [7:29-30] To sum it up, theirs was a closed society, with everything determined by the ruling elite. Everyone had a place and no one dared step outside it.

Into this closed, controlled world comes the radical, liberating word of God. This word is not coming from any of the power elite, not even the religious elite. This word is not happening in their courts and not in their temples. This word comes from where it is least expected. This word happened in the wilderness, where the power elite were unable to work their will to make things happen or to keep them from happening. This word happened, not to persons in charge, but to one of the outsiders, to John, a poor man, living a subsistence existence in the desert! This was a word spoken by a person without credentials—no Ph.D. there! And this word defines a different reality, with different definitions of insider and outsider ... where “the gift of newness is more authoritative than the grasp of oldness”. [Brueggemann] So, in these first two verses, Luke presents the conflict between the legitimated definers of reality [Tiberius, Pilate, the Herods, and the High Priests] and the new definition of reality announced by John and embodied by Jesus.

In verse three of our Gospel lesson we find the substance and shape of this alternative definition of reality: “[John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” This is the radical word that evokes both joy and hostility: baptism, repentance, forgiveness! This word may not sound radical to us who are so used to hearing this language Sunday by Sunday; but the new way of living it demanded was a direct threat to the reigning understanding of the way things were done.

Baptism “means solemn induction into a new community of value, perception and commitment” [Brueggemann]. John’s baptism suggests disengagement from the claims and the means of the power and authority of the power elite named in verse one. John’s message denies the legitimacy of the reigning reality of his day.

Repentance reinforces the significance of baptism. It means to change one’s thinking and perception, with the result that one sees all of life in new ways. It is not simply an interior process; it requires an outward change in behavior. Repentance literally means “to turn around”. Understood horizontally, repentance means a U-turn! Understood vertically, repentance means turning everything upside down! No wonder repentance means seeing everything in a new way! It “implies change in relationships, the abandonment of present loyalties and the embrace of new ones.” [Brueggemann] “Who is my mother and father and brothers,” Jesus asked his hearers, “but those who do God’s will?!”

God’s new reality announced by John is further described as *forgiveness* or *release* from sin. Again, these words are so familiar to us in our liturgies that we may miss their radicality. Into a world of *quid pro quo*, into a world in which people pay for what they get, where they get what is theirs by right, where people are not bailed out—into this world comes the liberating word of “forgiveness”. Forgiveness is not merely a “religious” experience. Forgiveness concerns every binding which robs people of their freedom. Forgiveness is an alternative way to order society—not by the love of power, but by the power of love!

Hear me carefully, my friends: the liberating word of God that came to John in the wilderness, the word that called into question the reality defined by the elite of his day, that word of God is a word for us, too! During this Advent season, we do well to ask ourselves, What is our present reality? Who determines how we live and what we value?

I, for one, confess that the particulars of the conflicting realities we face today may be different from those of John's day, but the essence is the same. We live in a world where the religious hierarchy can strip a 92-year-old Jesuit priest of his duties because he celebrated mass with an ordained woman priest! We live in a society that still imprisons persons of color and minorities all out of proportion to their percentage of our population. We still allow the wealthy to shelter their income in order to avoid paying their fair share of taxes. We continue to condone the use of violence to solve the world's problems and sacrifice our youth in the process. We bail out the corporate few and the banking elite and leave the many with the bill. I could go on and you could add to this list!

2,000 years after John appeared in the wilderness, our world is still too much determined by the love of power, rather than the power of love. John's word from God is just as relevant for us as it was for his contemporaries. The saving reality that broke into history in the appearance of John and Jesus is able to transform our present reality in life-saving and life-giving ways...*if we are able to receive that word*. We are the baptized ones, my friends. Let us live into our baptism by repenting of the ways that oppose and undermine the way of forgiveness and love. Let us boldly believe that forgiveness can reorder our world and enlarge the Reign of God in Jesus Christ.

This table, set with the bread that came down from heaven and the life that was poured out for us, is the place where we receive the forgiveness we need to offer our world. Take and eat to become part of the new order that is transforming the old.

AMEN