

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
December 9, 2018
Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.....

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pilate was..., and Herod was, and his brother Philip was, and the high priests were Annas and Caiaphas.... Luke begins his gospel book with a litany of historical and political names—naming the imperial, regional, and religious authorities who ruled when John the Baptist preached in the wilderness in the regions around the Jordan. Dating the historical and political scene—around the year 27 or so of the Christian Era is important to what Luke has to say. His story is not detached from history but happens in the context of real socio-political circumstances, specific in time and place. Like the rest of the Bible, for that matter—always specific to times and places. The Bible as a whole was written over a 1400 year period and covers nearly 4000 years of human history. It is a collection of books, a library. Generally speaking there are 66 books included (though some are divided up into more by scholars). Generally speaking, there are 39 books in the Hebrew Bible and another 27 in the Christian testament. It is a library of history through laws and wisdom and poetry and stories—specific to times and places and people and events.

I remember writing my first college paper, freshman year, for an Old Testament class. We were asked to write a page or two about the third chapter of the Book of the Prophet Habbakuk. As I recall, it was full of images of monsters coming up out of the sea and storms and devastation. That's what I wrote about. To my surprise and dismay, I got a 0 (out of 100) on that paper. I was totally taken-aback to learn that those "monsters" were not figments of someone's imagination but were the author's way of describing an invasion of Babylonian ships coming over the horizon to defeat and conquer and exile the people of Israel. History. It was an interpretive account—a prophetic challenge to a defeated nation—intended to help them keep faith and maintain their allegiance to God alone. (Or something like that. Freshman year was a long time ago.) History. That's when

I got interested. Before that I thought a myth was just a story. Myth is much much more. Myths and stories emerge from history and serve as fundamental building blocks that shape and influence the worldview, the customs, ideals and values of people and nations. The Bible is 4000 years of history—specific to times and places and people and events—and of God's involvement with humankind. It is important to name names because these histories also contrast human kingdoms with God's sovereignty. You might say, "You've got to know that bad news in order to tell the good news."

For Luke, the claims to authority that Tiberius or Herod or the high priests made are not ultimate. It is the proclamation—about God's sovereignty—*no matter how things may look*—that sets John's ministry in motion. God's sovereignty—*no matter how things may look*—that is the source of hope and courage. God's sovereignty—*no matter how things may look*—that sets John's ministry and ultimately Jesus' mission into motion. John has been commissioned *to prepare the way* not for Caesar or any earthly ruler but for the one true God and Creator of humankind.

Upstairs, where we hold Bible study on Sunday mornings is a poster I framed years ago. It is a photograph of Archbishop Desmond Tutu holding a Bible. Bishop Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize recipient and spiritual mentor of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa. Below his photo is this quote from the Archbishop—

*"I don't know what Bible people are reading,
when they say that religion and politics don't mix."*

Bishop Tutu's "politics," of course, don't have anything to do with which party one belongs to—being partisan or bipartisan—but his message is always specific to times and places and people and events. That's what politics is. And, his message is always founded in a worldview, customs, ideals and values learned from 4000 years of God's involvement with humankind. Here are some challenging words from Bishop Tutu—Prophet Desmond Tutu—what we need to hear today in the context of our own unfolding history—specific to our time, our national and global struggles—just like the prophet John the Baptist in his own time and place. This is what the *call to repentance* looks like today:

It doesn't matter where we worship or what we call God; there is only one, inter-dependent human family. We are born for goodness, to love—free of prejudice. All of us, without exception. There is greater commonality in our belief systems than we tend to credit, a golden thread expressed in the maxim that one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself. I don't believe in the notion of "opposing belief systems." It would be more accurate to say that human beings have a long history of rationalizing acts of inhumanity on the basis of their own interpretations of the will of God.

This gives meaning today, to the ancient words of Isaiah—

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Bishop Tutu writes:

Our failure to recognize the humanity in others lays the foundations for selfishness rather than selflessness. It leads to gross inequity and hideous disparities in qualities of life – and, often, the degradation of environments in which relatively poor people live. A world that recognizes the equal worth and vulnerabilities of all its people will be a much more peaceful place.

I don't know where you were on Wednesday but I had a number of places where I had to be and errands that I had to run all day long. But it was the day of President George H. W. Bush's funeral at the Washington Cathedral. (Since I didn't receive a *personal invitation* to attend) I wanted to be sure to catch it on the radio—I wanted to listen especially to the preacher and the speakers— so I timed my stops in order to be in the car listening to the radio as each speaker went to the microphone. I know how Episcopal services are designed, of course, so I was able to organize my timing, *an occupational benefit*, knowing the order of the service, how long the readings and prayers will take, the music placements—sorry to say I missed the prayers and music, but I was able to be in my car at the right moments to hear the preacher and the speakers. What an amazing opportunity—an amazing opportunity—to listen to how we mix religion and politics today—in the best sense of those words—and discern, or try to discern, what God might be trying to

accomplish through our imperfect lives and the imperfect leaders of the world. What are we to learn? Is there anything that becomes clear at times like this in the complicated and messiness of the world and our lives? We try. Eleanor Roosevelt once said,

Learn from the mistakes of others. You can't live long enough to make them all yourself.

Mistakes or Successes. It's hard to know for sure which is which.

Jon Meacham, Presidential biographer, one of the speakers at the funeral, recounted President Bush's "life code,"

Tell the truth, don't blame people. Be strong, do your best, try hard, forgive, stay the course.

Meacham called this "the most American of creeds." And added:

Abraham Lincoln's *Better Angels of Our Nature* and George H.W. Bush's *Thousand Points of Light* are companion verses in America's national hymn, for Lincoln and Bush both called on us to choose the right over the convenient, to hope rather than to fear, and to heed not our worst impulses, but our best instincts.

Perhaps what will be most remembered about President Bush and may help shape our lives yet, whether as individuals or as a nation, is his call for a "kinder, gentler nation."

In Luke's Gospel, John the Baptist challenges God's people to see the wilderness not as a place of desolation, but of hope. John the Baptist tells the people that God is calling them, just as he did the Babylonian exiles, to head home through the wilderness. John the Baptist tells the people — that God is calling them, just as he did the people of Israel in Egypt, to join an exodus out of slavery and trust God's promised of a fresh start. John the Baptist preaches — the first step toward freedom is to put God and God's ways first. Repentance is not a regret for past misdeeds but a change of mind and heart, putting God first, the kind of inner transformation that makes a difference in the things we hope for, choices we make, and the way we live our lives. John the Baptist points to God. It is God

who will do the providing, who will mark a new path, who will provide the light, the way, and will bring about peace. John quotes the prophet Isaiah and describes the earthshaking transformation that must take place. But, he assures, God will provide!

“Valleys will be filled, mountains and hills will be humbled,
everything crooked made straight and true.”

Politics and religion. It's just the way things are. The world's claims are often in conflict with God's claims. Paths that seem satisfactory to us are not good enough for God. John calls us to let God reshape the world's social systems and the landscape of our own minds and hearts. In Christ, says John the Baptist, the reshaping has begun.

God's dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion.

Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.

God can only smile because only God can know what is coming next. We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low.

Without forgiveness, there is no future.

Desmond Tutu

In Christ, the reshaping has begun. This is the work of Advent. This is the work we are all called to do.

AMEN