

Malachi 3:1-4
Canticle 16
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

Advent 2C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Repent

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...

Wow – that’s quite the list of names. Both Dan and I had to resort to the biblical pronunciation guide to be sure to get them right! I imagine you recognize some of the names. Caiaphas is likely familiar, especially if you’ve seen Jesus Christ, Superstar – or if you’ve read Matthew’s gospel. According to Matthew, after Jesus was betrayed by Judas, he was taken by Temple Guards to the great high priest Caiaphas, to be tried. As the religious authority, Caiaphas condemned Jesus, then turned him over to Pontius Pilate. As the Roman civil authority, Pilate condemned Jesus to death.

Annas, Caiaphas’ father-in-law, is thought to be the one who had orchestrated it all – he’d been the high priest before Caiaphas, but the Roman authorities couldn’t manipulate him the way they wanted to, so he was ousted. Then there were the joint governors Herod, Philip and Lysanias and of course, the Emperor, Tiberius. These men ruled Jerusalem, politically, economically and religiously – they were a powerful line-up! But why did we have to hear all those names? Sometimes important people are named in the bible so we can identify a certain point in time. The fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius was the year 33CE. But I think there is much more to this listing of these powerful and power-crazed men. Listen again...

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 wilderness.

God didn’t send news of the coming Messiah to the important religious authorities in the Jerusalem Temple. And God didn’t send that news to the important civil authorities in Rome. God sent news of the coming Messiah to a most unexpected person – John - in a most unexpected place... the wilderness. Why? The world at that time, just as at this time, was overwhelmed by corruption, greed, power-mongering and all manner of ugliness. So why didn’t God send news of the Messiah – why didn’t God send the Messiah into the heart of the problem instead of sending it into the vast and mostly empty wilderness?

What do you think of when you think of the wilderness? In the New Testament, the word “wilderness” or in Greek “eremos” translates as a deserted place or a desert. While wilderness might not be a place where we’ve spent a lot of time, surely we recall the significance of

wilderness in the bible. The Israelites wandered 40 years in the wilderness. Just after he was baptized, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, all the while being tempted by Satan. The wilderness is a place of danger, a place of uncertainty, a place of testing and challenge. One is very vulnerable in the wilderness. And isn't it interesting that it is precisely in that scary place of uncertainty and vulnerability, that God shows up? It's what always happens. Back when the Israelites wandered through the night in the wilderness, God showed up as a pillar of fire. By day, God showed up as a pillar of cloud. When the Israelites were starving in the wilderness, God showed up with manna and quail. When they were thirsty in the wilderness, God showed up with springs of water from a rock. When Jesus was with Satan in the wilderness, God's Holy Spirit was there too. And when Jesus prayed in those many deserted places he so often went away to, God always showed up. As it turns out, God often shows up in the most unexpected people and in the most unexpected places. It is not lost on me that the word of God came to the unexpected John, in the unexpected wilderness. We are formed and informed in the wilderness.

This Advent, some of us find ourselves in a wilderness of uncertainty, exhaustion, hopelessness and even fear. So, in the wilderness of this Advent season, perhaps we can ponder how we might be formed by the God who shows up so unexpectedly. In the midst of our Advent preparing and waiting and wondering... in the midst of longing for God to show up in Bethlehem and in our world too, in the midst of yearning for the salvation God promises all people, how will we allow ourselves to be formed? Advent isn't a time for passive waiting for the baby Jesus to appear in the manger. That's what Paul was talking about too. Don't wait around for me to get out of jail. Don't wait passively for "the leader" to do everything or to make everything right. Pay attention! Recognize God in your midst, recognize God in you and recognize this wilderness, as an unexpected opportunity to be transformed.

Transformation is what happens when the Word of God, the Word made flesh, comes to and through unexpected people in unexpected places. This is one of Luke's favorite themes and an Advent theme too - God comes to us in the most unexpected times and people and places, and our Advent watching and waiting and longing and expectation will, if we pay attention, show us this truth. It's such good news that God shows up in the places of deepest vulnerability and where we least expect to find God. We only need to notice – which of course is another Advent theme. We have to pay attention. I know this so well. But it's hard, because when I'm in a vulnerable place my mind is often full of thoughts about trying to find the solution, trying to figure out what went wrong, trying to fix the problem. But that doesn't work. When I am struggling mightily with someone or something in my life, what I need to do is stop. Stop, and pay attention.

The struggle is always in some part with myself, but there are times when people provoke chaos, hurt, disappointment and even anger in us. So the reality that God comes to us in the most unexpected times and people and places reminds me that if I pay attention, I really will find God in these difficult situations. And while I can't always see God in those who demean and dehumanize, those who care for little other than power and greed and themselves, I can

remember that God redeems everything and that God's love is greater than any ugliness in the world. The promise that God is in these wilderness places with us is a great relief in so many ways. It means we can stop looking for who is right and who is wrong, and look for Jesus. It means we can stop looking for evidence of what has gone sideways, and look for Jesus. It means we can stop looking for more places to criticize ourselves or others, and look for Jesus. It means we can stop endlessly revisiting conversations and comments and justifications and judgments and simply return to love. Pretty amazing, isn't it?

If you've ever been caught up in a distressing situation with a person, if you've ever found yourself in a place where you cannot for the life of you see a way forward, – and if you've lived long enough, you certainly have – remembering that God really is in the most unexpected places is more than a gift – it is a profound and lifegiving relief. Actually, seeing God in the most unexpected places is even more than a relief. I think it might be the repentance both John and Jesus talked about. To turn around, to change our minds and our hearts, to reorient ourselves toward God, is to repent. And when we do that, when we repent, we prepare the way of the Lord. The prophet Isaiah and the prophet John both said it. When we repent, when we prepare the way of the Lord, when we pay attention and look for God in the unexpected places, it isn't just good for us, it's good for everyone and everything. When we repent, when we straighten out the crooked parts of our lives, we're told all people will see the salvation of God. To prepare, to notice, to repent, to reorient ourselves toward God is to return to the truth of ourselves as God's beloved daughters and sons. We are all created in God's own image, beautiful and lovely and good.

Yes, we've gone astray –from time to time, we all go astray. And just as reorienting ourselves toward God is good for everyone and everything, going astray HURTS everyone and everything. It's what Jesus was talking about when he said "Love your neighbor as yourself"¹. It's because we're all one and your neighbor is yourself. It's what the apostle Paul was talking about when he said "Where if one suffers we all suffer, if one is honored, all rejoice."² We are all deeply connected. And whether we're going in the right direction – that would be toward God - or the wrong direction – that would be away from God – we MUST recognize that our actions have an impact far beyond ourselves.

In Advent, as we watch and wait and long for the one who was and is and is to come, we are invited to reorient, to repent and to find God even in those places we would never expect – the tiresome neighbor, the disagreeable coworker, the angry child, the unfaithful spouse, the criminal, the cancer, the election. God is here. God is in all those places too, and God promises to stay here, right here with each and every one of us, no matter what the circumstances of our lives or the world may be. And that, my dears, is good news indeed. Amen

¹ Matthew 22:39

² 1 Corinthians 12:26

