

Sunday December 5th, 2021
Advent II

Luke 3:1-6
“Make Way!”

It was clear to all who cared to observe that he had been in politics for too long a time. He was jaded and his sensitivity was gone. Frankly, he just didn't care anymore. Suddenly, into his office the devil himself walked. For several minutes, Satan and the politician, conversed cordially, and then Satan made his offer. The devil told the politician that he would brighten his political future.

He could restore his jaded view, giving him greater power, prestige, and the material possessions to go along with it. All the politician had to do, was to trade his soul for these demonic blessings. The politician never hesitated. He signed the papers to consummate the deal. As Satan rolled up the contract and headed for the door, the politician stopped him and asked, “Now that we've closed the deal, please tell me; I get all these wonderful things from you and all you get is my soul; so, what's the catch?” (Humorous Illustrations, p.334) In other words, his soul meant nothing to him.

Are you as jaded, and as troubled by what is happening to our society's leadership as I am? Between, court cases, and the mayors of several municipalities, the situation at Queens Park, and troubles on the federal political stage, I wonder where all the great leaders have gone. And let us not even get started with the situations in the Middle East, and Europe or south of the border. When I read any books on history, or even the bible itself, I find terrific examples of inspired leaders who lead amazing changes.

Martin Luther and the reformation, Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement, Winston Churchill during WWII, Abraham Lincoln confronting slavery, Mother Theresa, Agnes McPhail our first woman MP, King David, Solomon, the prophets: all amazing people, and all amazing leaders. Now, no one is disputing that all of them had personal faults, but they did emerge as real leaders.

As discouraging, as I currently find our own lack of leadership as a society right now, it seems that in every period of time, people suffered from poor leadership. I find it interesting, that when Luke tells the story of John the Baptist in Luke 3, he begins with a list of historical figures. At first read, one would conclude that this was simply a way to date the events that were being recorded, and that is surely one of its functions, but there is something else at work here.

Luke's list also reveals how poor the leadership of the known world was at the time of Jesus' ministry. The list is a rogue's gallery of tyrants and appeasers that made life miserable for everyone. Luke begins with Caesar Tiberius, who was a reluctant emperor of Rome. By this I mean, he was sort of forced into the role by circumstance, and it was a role he never wanted. His reign however, was, one of remarkable peace.

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Then there is the Governor of the region, Pontius Pilate; who was appointed by Tiberius. Surely you've heard of him. So, wishy washy in his leadership, he bowed to pressure from all directions, eventually crucifying Jesus.

Then we have Herod, who only pretended to be a Jew for political gain. It was Herod who had John the Baptist killed, and who humiliated Jesus. Finally, Luke even mentioned Annas and Caiaphas, the puppet high priests who hand Jesus over to the Romans for execution. This list is not just for the historical records, but to show how everyone in leadership in Jesus' day was rotten.

Luke's list of rotten apples, includes dictators, money hungry politicians, corrupt religious leaders, and by implication every politician who is answerable to the corrupt leadership. It was awful on every level and that was Luke's point. And in a way we understand Luke's frustration. Every day we pick up a newspaper or listen to the news on television, and we learn about sexual scandals about politicians.

Turn the page, and we find a story about how a mega church pastor embezzled money, or the head of an investment firm used insider trading to make millions. Our response is what? Surely, we may feel disgust, perhaps some sadness, but quite often we simply shake our heads, shrug our shoulders and say, "What else is new?" We have become so cynical about our leadership that we rarely are shocked anymore when a leader falls.

I bet that many people in Jesus' day, and John the Baptist's day, were asking the same question we are today; "Where have all the great leaders gone?" This ongoing poor expression of leadership makes what John the Baptist does, and says, even more powerful. Luke tells us that God speaks to John. In the midst of this awful mess of a world gone mad, the word of God arrives.

Now, we are never told how, or when, John receives the word. Maybe he was praying one night, and God spoke to him. Maybe John had a vision. Perhaps, John had seen enough of the fake religion of his day that he felt stirred by the Holy Spirit to action. However, the Word of God came; it would not let John go. It seized him. One day he is Zechariah's little miracle boy, and the next, he takes to the wilderness along the Jordan River baptizing and preaching.

God's word does that to people. It comes to people, seizes them, and shakes them up. It comes, and suddenly a person sees the world for what it really is; a messed up place. It compels the receiver to go forth, and do something to call people to hear God's call to repent, turn things around. Yes, it would be nice to know how John received the word of God, but we never learn that, but we see it in action.

The word of God comes, it transforms, it convicts, it cannot be held back and it sends. John the Baptist is one of those biblical figures we have a bit easier time picturing in our minds. We see him as rough, dressed oddly in camel hair, a fire in his eyes and in his words. The people came at first because he was a curiosity and then they realized the power and dangerous nature of his preaching.

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John's message, given by God, is dangerous, it's revolutionary. "Prepare the way of the Lord; make a straight highway. Level the mountains! Fill in the Valleys! God is coming!"

We have heard these words so many times that perhaps the historical context has been lost to us, that maybe we have forgotten how controversial they were. We breeze over these words, as if John is talking metaphorically about God doing some divine landscaping. But imagine this instead. On the edge of the wilderness, near the town of Bethlehem, and not far from where John is preaching in the wilderness, there was a massive fortress that stood on a man-made mountain.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of labourers moved thousands of tons of rock and earth, to build this mountain castle, called the *Herodium*, after Herod's father. Herod the Great, the ruler when Jesus was born, build the fortress after a military victory in that location. The Herodium was a massive seven story military outpost. The remains of this fortress can still be seen in Israel.

John's words are directed at Herod: every mountain will be leveled. John's listeners got the reference. They knew how provocative the words were, and how dangerous they were. I was trying to think of something to explain the sense of what John is saying, and then I remembered something. When I was a kid, we used to pile snow up into a hill or use a snow bank to play "king of the hill".

The object of the game was to stand on the top of the hill, and push all the other kids away who would try and knock you off the top spot. Personally speaking, I was never very good at this type of game. John the Baptist is saying to Herod, "Hey, king of the mountain, you are going to get knocked off your high perch." Herod, who was always concerned with his own position, and power, is frightened by these words, and angered by them. He was so angry that he arrests John, and eventually has him beheaded.

We hear similar words to John's from Mary, the mother of Jesus, in Luke chapter one. We often think of Mary as this shy, quiet, young woman; peacefully agreeing to submit to God's plan. However, I rarely hear teenagers talk like this. *"His mighty arm does tremendous things! How he scatters the proud and haughty ones! He has taken princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. He has satisfied the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands."*

There are some people, who if they heard these words from a young person today, might label them a hippie or communist. We don't like the status quo challenged. This explains why so many people expressed outright distain for the "Black Lives Matter" movement and its incarnation here in Toronto. "You would never catch any of us expressing such sedition." Really?

Well guess what; every Sunday, we pray these same sorts of words. Every Sunday! "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Most of us have no idea that when we pray these words we are being seditious, or calling for revolution. You and I, as we pray the word of God, we are rebels. This is not about communism, or socialism,

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or any of the other isms we like to talk about and promote as humans. God's revolution is much more than this.

John's message nibbles away at our consciousness. It reveals things about ourselves we would rather not know. We don't want to be reminded of how far we have fallen from the standard God wants for us. We erroneously believe that when we are comfortable in our circumstance, we are closer to the Kingdom of God. Nothing could be further from the truth. God's kingdom should make us uncomfortable.

John said as much, a bit further on from our reading today. As crowds came to be baptized by John he shouts, *"Don't just say, 'We're safe-we're descendants of Abraham.' That proves nothing. God can change these stones here into children of Abraham. Even now the axe of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever your roots. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire."* (Luke 3:8-9)

We are trees that have produced rotten fruit or perhaps no fruit at all, and John shouts across the centuries, "Repent! Turn from your wicked ways." We are not the king of the mountain, no matter what makes up the hill we stand on. We can believe that we stand on a mountain of our own accomplishments, our own righteousness, or own sense of entitlement, and sometimes we believe our mole hills are made into mountains.

John doesn't care what we stand on if it isn't Jesus. Because if it isn't Jesus, you stand on, it's going to get leveled.

And if you think you can dig a great big valley between you, and God's convicting words, I must tell you that the valley will get filled, and the Word made flesh is coming right for you. John's message is not complicated, nor is Jesus' call to us. "Make way!" The King of Kings is standing at the threshold of your heart, ready to walk in and turn your whole life upside down. Jesus said it about himself, "Behold! I stand at the door and knock." Are we ready?

John calls us to repent, and be baptized, and I wonder why he throws baptism into the mix. It is clear John is not making a theological statement as to the method and ritual meaning of baptism. He is simply calling us all to get clean, change our lives. Make a fresh start! How does that make you feel? How many of us could really use a fresh start today?

I mentioned earlier, all the examples of corruption in our world, and the list seems endless. Add to that, the struggles of our own lives, and we can really begin to see everything with cynical eyes.

We can really depress ourselves contemplating this world, and we can even begin to appreciate why God sent a flood in Noah's day. Wouldn't it be great to have a fresh start? Well, John speaks to that yearning in all of us for something new and fresh. I remember once being at a seminar put on by IVCF when I was at the University of Guelph. The seminar was on the problem of evil, or why bad things happen.

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The center of the debate was on the question of “If God is truly good and loved all of us, why doesn’t he just rid the world of all the evil we experience and see?”

It is a question we all ask at some point, but the answer given that night I will never forget. The presenter, in response to the question, asked us this, “If God truly got rid of all the evil in the world (wiped the slate clean) what would he have to do?” Think about that for a moment. What would God have to do?

The answer to that question is devastating, because if God truly wanted to rid the world of evil, he would have to rid the world of all of us. Evil, corruption, and the sin that exists: is evidence of God’s patience, and longing, that none of us should perish. Every time we hear of a scandal, we should be urged to make sure we are ready. Every sin revealed, and every scandal we hear about, is like Jesus knocking loudly at the door.

John’s words, Jesus’ ministry, and our calling, are all about being revolutionaries. When we turn our lives around, and get baptized, as John calls us to, we join God’s crew leveling the mountains of the tyrants, and filling in the valleys of despair. John the Baptist understood what Jesus’ coming meant. Mary understood what Jesus’ coming meant and Christians for centuries have known what Jesus’ coming meant.

You know the Christmas Carol *Hark the Glad Sound*? The first verse goes, “Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes! The Saviour promised long! Let every hear prepare a throne, and every voice a song.” Lovely words, cheerful even, but do you remember verses 3 and 4.

“He comes the prisoner to release, in Satan’s bondage held; the gates of brass before him burst, the iron fetters yield. He comes the broken heart to bind, the bleeding soul to cure, and with the treasures of his grace t’enrich the humble poor.” Philip Doddridge who composed these words knew what Jesus’ coming means. The only question for all of us is, do we know what it means? I hope we do!