

“Christ’s Autobahn” GPPC 12-6-15
Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6

As you might guess, working for a church is a little bit odd. For one thing, we always begin our staff meetings by sharing personal joys and concerns around the circle and then having a prayer. (When was the last time you did that at your workplace?) And some weeks we also have a brief Bible study as part of the meeting. It not only grounds us in the ministry we do, but I can sometimes steal a sermon illustration from the group as well.

This week we talked about Luke 3:1-6 at the meeting and I said, “Beyond the purpose of tripping preachers up when they try to read the names aloud, why do you think Luke lists all these people and their positions at the beginning of chapter three?” One person (I think it was Jane, our Financial Administrator), said, “Name-dropping.” That certainly seems possible, right? “It’s not *what* you know; it’s *who* you know that matters.”

Another person, I think it was Bill, our Organist and Traditional Music Director, said, “Luke is setting the story in history.” And that

Jeff Paschal

suggestion also has merit. Luke wants us to know this is not a fairy tale, “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...” No. Luke wants us to know he is describing real events that happened in real places. The people, positions, and places set what happens in place, time, and reality.

But maybe there's also another reason we're treated to all these names, positions, and places. Luke is setting us up.

If we read between the lines and read the text the way Luke's first readers might have read it, he says, “Here's when it all happened. The Emperor Tiberius was in the 15th year of his reign. Like all the other Roman emperors he ruled with the gentle persuasion of the sword. And there was Pontius Pilate, his appointed governor of Judea, and Herod, ruler of Galilee, and his brother, Philip over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias, ruling Abilene. Here are the empire's power people, the insiders. Sitting on thrones. ‘Hey, you! Drop some more grapes in my mouth, and be quick about it!’ Tooling around in their motorcades, um, I mean their processions. So impressive. Tiberius, who thinks he rules the world, with the help of Tiberius' cruel stooges. And with them are the religious authorities, high priests Anna and then Caiaphas. They are also

Jeff Paschal

powerful and imposing. And many of these folks will have a hand later on in the crucifixion of Jesus.” Luke is saying, “When events unfolded, these are the folks who were in power, or who at least *appeared* to be in power.” Luke’s first readers would understand the meaning behind the list of names, positions, and places. And so do we. So impressive. No. Not really. There’s something and someone much greater on the way.

And “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” Wait. What? Wouldn’t the word of God come to one of these fabulously powerful men sitting on a throne? No. How about to one of respected religious leaders working in the place of worship? No.

The word of God comes to John, who’s the son of the priest Zechariah, but who otherwise doesn’t seem to have been all that well known. Certainly he commanded no armies and led no church staff meetings. And the word of God came to him not in a palace, not in a worship space, but in the wilderness.

When Luke says the word “wilderness,” he does not mean a quick trip out to Hamilton Lakes for a picnic. As one scholar says, “the wilderness... [is] a key place of activity in Luke, whether of testing...or

Jeff Paschal

of prayer, withdrawal, and miracles...” (Mariam J. Kamell in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1, 47.*)

In her book entitled *Wild* writer Cheryl Strayed tells about her retreat to the wilderness to walk 1,100 miles of the rugged Pacific Crest Trail. She hoped to rediscover herself after a painful divorce, the death of mother, and her own self-destructive behavior. And rediscover herself she did.

The wilderness is a significant place, a location where God might speak and we might hear. And sometimes the wilderness may not even be a physical location. It may simply be an emotional or spiritual place where we find ourselves withdrawing for a time. Maybe we feel we need quiet to listen for God for a while. Or possibly we feel we're being tested, waiting for something to happen, for God to act in some way.

What about you and me? Have we ever physically gone into the wilderness and had a word from God come to us? Or have we ever been in an emotional or spiritual wilderness praying, waiting for a word from God to come showing us a path to take or reminding us of some truth or

Jeff Paschal

unveiling a new truth? Has that ever happened? Is that where we are right now? Or is the wilderness where we should be going?

As the time neared for his thirty-something-year-old son to die of brain cancer, Duke Divinity School Professor Richard Lischer spoke of his family's time in a spiritual wilderness. He said, "For some time now the five of us had been attending to sermons in a new way. We listened for the word of God the way a dog on the back of a pickup truck flattens its ears and leans into the wind; we responded to the sermon's theme as if it were chosen with our family in mind (which it might have been). We absorbed the nuances of the spoken word, the imagery of each hymn, and the liturgy's every move, as if the entire package constituted a single promise to us. We were worshiping as if our lives depended on it." (Richard Lischer, *Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son*, 181.)

Seemingly insignificant John is in the wilderness with his ears flattened, leaning into the wind, listening. And the word of God comes to him. It's not something he dreams up. It's not an advertising slogan. Not something that will help him move up the corporate ladder. Not an investment scheme or a plan to find a trophy spouse. No. This word is

Jeff Paschal

unexpected and beyond him. This word comes from God. And the word moves John into action. It sends him out of the wilderness and into the region around the Jordan with a proclamation.

Luke says John proclaims “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” His baptism is different from the baptism that converts to Judaism underwent during that time. As one scholar says, John’s baptism “was not an entrance ritual into a new religion...but a mark of repentance or ‘turning’—a reorientation of one’s life on a new course.” (Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, 52.)

John knows that Christ the Lord is coming. So he calls all who will listen to repent, to turn around, to reorient their lives to the One who comes. And John uses an interesting image to illustrate his message. He quotes from the prophet Isaiah, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Can we see the image being painted here? It’s a highway, a superhighway. Every valley filled. Every mountain and hill leveled.

Jeff Paschal

Crooked turns straightened. Rough ways smoothed out. So all people will be able to see, to experience God's salvation.

John is announcing Christ's superhighway, Christ's autobahn. Christ is on the way. So we get the road to our hearts ready for his arrival. We pray to God and ask to be empowered to bridge the chasms of our stubbornness, to knock down the mountains of our selfishness, to straighten out our laziness, to smooth over all our sinful ways, so that we might experience the saving power of God in our lives. So that we might be freed, unbound from the things that keep us from experiencing fullness of life, the salvation God wills for us.

What we're talking about is repentance, turning around, changing our mind, reinvesting ourselves in following Christ, our Lord and Savior. John is not talking about minor improvements; he's proclaiming a total reorientation. Lives opened up, like the German autobahn and its sections without speed limits, so Christ can speed uninterrupted into our hearts and minds.

And I don't know about you, but a part of me finds John's good news to be exhausting and threatening. Exhausting, because I know how

Jeff Paschal

often my best laid plans and promises to be a better Christian do not, in fact, materialize. Yes, by God's grace, I think I sometimes make progress on my spiritual journey, but it's not a smooth, well-paved superhighway. It's more like a dirt road with a bunch of potholes and if you try to drive it fast, you'll tear out the underside of your car. You have to drive slowly and carefully, dodging the potholes. And you still might even end up in the ditch and have to back the whole stinking car up. You might have to call for a tow truck. Occasionally, it's an exhausting mess. And I sometimes find John's message to be threatening, because I know I mess up and end up in the ditch. And meanwhile John is talking about preparing for Christ's autobahn. And I want to say, "John, you must be kidding."

How can this be good news?

I think it's good news because any progress we make on preparing "the way of the Lord," repenting and welcoming Christ into our hearts is actually the work of God, not our work. If we make progress on our spiritual journey, (what we used to call sanctification), the best we can ever claim for ourselves is that we might have gotten out of the way a

Jeff Paschal

little bit to allow God to work in us. And even then, we may have claimed too much credit for ourselves.

So here's the paradox. Yes, we're invited, even called to listen for the word of God, maybe even to go into whatever wilderness is needed to flatten our ears and hear that word. And yes, we're invited, even called, to repent, to change our minds, to knock down the obstacles, straighten the curves, to turn back to following Christ, to reorient and reinvest in the One who is the Lord of Life. Prepare the way of the Lord.

But really it's all about what God in Christ does, not what we do. Christ empowers us to hear. Christ grants us the ability to repent. And when we don't repent very well, Christ pulls us out of the ditch when our proud superhighway is just a muddy country road.

I suppose Jane was right. Luke *is* a name dropper. It's not what you know, but who you know that matters. And I suppose Bill was right. The story is set in history, our history, and the world's broken history. But here is how John says it ends, "And all flesh shall see the salvation of God." "And all flesh shall see the salvation of God." "And all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Amen. ©Jeff Paschal