

Second Weekend of Advent (C/RCL)  
Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6  
December 8-9, 2018  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

We're past Thanksgiving family get-togethers and now anticipate Christmas ones. To keep the peace, "Don't discuss religion or politics!" is a rule of thumb for many ☺ -- advice Luke certainly ignores in his Gospel, including the part of the story we hear today.

**Luke loved history** – would've definitely submitted his DNA for "23 & Me" analysis, if they'd had it in his day. He sets today's Gospel within the empire of Rome, within the country of Palestine, within the region of Judea, and in the wilderness around the Jordan River. He gives us the political and religious leaders of the time, most of whom will play a part in the upcoming story of our Lord Jesus' public ministry, passion and death.

*<sup>1</sup>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 Iturea and Trachonitis,  
and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,  
<sup>2</sup>during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,  
the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.  
<sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan,  
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins....*  
Luke 3:1-3

Luke wants us to know that Jesus of Nazareth, the One we call Jesus the Christ, Son of God, Savior, was born into **our** history, lived in a corner of **this** earth, and upset the **political** apple cart of the Roman Empire and the **religious** apple cart of Judaism as it was known in those days.

Instead of a psalm this weekend, our *Celebrate* insert includes a canticle, the song of praise Zechariah sang in celebration of the birth of his son, John. It is named the *Benedictus*, Latin for the first word:

*“Blessed are you, Lord, the God of Israel,  
you have come to your people and set them free.”*  
Luke 1:68

The son of Zechariah is, of course, also the son of Elizabeth, kinswoman of Mary, cousin of Jesus, the babe who leapt for joy in his mother’s womb when his still-in-utero Lord approached (Luke 1:44). St. Luke says nothing about John wearing a camel’s hair garment or eating a strange diet of grasshoppers dipped in honey. But the essentials are the same in all four Gospels:

*He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:3)*

Baptism was a Jewish ritual of washing, cleansing. But as we’ll hear in next week’s Gospel, John’s call for repentance required a change of heart, outright **transformation**, “**amendment of life**” in the old lingo, not simply good intentions. The language in the first lesson from Malachi suggests a somewhat painful soul-cleansing process that the Holy Spirit uses:

- *... he is like a refiner’s fire* [sounds hot!]
- *and like fuller’s soap...* [sounds abrasive!]
- *a refiner and purifier of silver,*
- *and he will purify the descendants of Levi*
- *and refine them like gold and silver. (Malachi 3:2b-3b)*

“*It’s a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God,*” we read in Hebrews 10:31. I’ve seen a picture to go with that verse: it’s a little bedraggled person who has clearly been run through the wash, rinse and spin cycle of a clothes washer, or scrubbed on a corrugated

wash board, or beaten on rocks next to a river.... then hung up to dry. **God will do whatever is necessary to scrub us clean**, remove the soil from our souls, make us like new....

Spiritual Oxyclean takes many forms. Sometimes it's physical suffering. Sometimes it's painful natural consequences, legal or relational consequences of our sins. Sometimes it's the unexpected turn of events that upends our carefully orchestrated life and takes us out of the driver's seat. But, given an opening, **God will do whatever is necessary to scrub us clean**. It can be simpler than we imagine – or harder. Ingrained unholy habits will take stronger medicine and more time than passing trespasses.

Let's be hopeful, though! This weekend's snippet from the letter to the Philippians includes this verse, full of promise:

*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)*

What the Lord begins, the Lord finishes – finishes well. But that's also **not** to say the final outcome is preordained and automatic. We are called to be active participants as God works out God's will **for** us and **through** us!

Here's an example of what I mean. When Kristiane was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade or so, she looked longingly at a picture of ballerinas and said, "I can't wait to be en pointe when I'm in 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade!" At the time she was taking only Irish dance. I had to remind her, "But that means you have to take ballet between now and then!" Or what if a teen said, "I can't wait till I'm 22 and graduate from college!" We'd point out, "But you have to **attend** college in order to **graduate** from college."

Our baptism was mystical, but it's not magic. There's a difference. Like a wedding, baptism wasn't a "one and done" event. It is stepping over a threshold into a new life. If

someone's life after the wedding doesn't change to reflect lifelong commitment and love, the marriage isn't going to last. If my life isn't a journey to draw closer to my Lord and serve my neighbor more faithfully, I'm a Christian in name but not in substance. It's not a matter of works righteousness. It's a matter of living a life of faith active in love.

It's all riding on God's grace. But we have to **want** what Paul prays for in Philippians:

*...that your love may overflow more and more  
with knowledge and full insight  
to help you determine what is best,  
so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless,  
having produced the harvest of righteousness  
that comes through Jesus Christ  
for the glory and praise of God.*

For that to happen more and more, there's got to be some soul-scrubbing going on daily.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham