

## CENTERS OF POWER

The gospel reading on this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent comes from the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Luke. This chapter marks a scene change in Luke's gospel. The first two chapters tell the story of the birth of Jesus in a grand style, almost like an elaborate pageant or opera. But now the curtain has come down. There is a brief intermission while the stagehands clear away the stable, the animal wranglers round up the sheep and cattle and donkeys, the angels and shepherds retire to the dressing rooms, and the principal characters, Mary and Joseph and Jesus, take a break before they are brought back on the stage again.

Not only does the scene change, the style of writing changes as well. We are no longer in the mode of grand opera, with a cast of hundreds and soaring arias. Now Luke adopts a more journalistic style of writing. And as the curtain rises on Act 2, we notice that we are in a different setting, no longer in Bethlehem.

*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.*

*He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,*

*“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*‘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.’”*

*Luke 3:1-6*

John Morris, writing in the *Christian Century*, engages in a bit of literary fantasy. He brings to mind two icons of American literature. First, the poet Emily Dickinson, the “quiet and reclusive woman” who lived a quiet and reclusive life in Amherst, Massachusetts. Then he thinks of Walt Whitman, the “wild man of American poetry” who wrote with an energy and a sensuality that was a considerable contrast to the sober lives of the good people of Amherst, like the Dickinson family.

Bringing these two radically different poets to mind, Morris then recalls a professor who once informed him of two things: that the Dickinson family was fond of taking picnics to the beach; and that Walt Whitman was equally fond of “going to a beach, stripping off all his clothes and running in the sand while yelling his poetry into the wind.” And so, with these two images in mind, he likes to imagine a scene in which the prim and proper Dickinson family, having just laid out their blankets on the beach and arranged their picnic lunch, are sitting decently and in order, munching on their cucumber sandwiches, only to have a naked Walt Whitman come flying over a sand dune, bellowing out lines from “Song of Myself.” (*Christian Century*, Nov. 22-29, 2000, p. 1215) It is a delicious image to those of us who are afflicted with a slightly bent and mischievous sense of humor.

And it is a marvelous image of the way that John the Baptist makes his appearance in the Luke's gospel and into our season of Advent. But John doesn't intrude merely to kick a little sand onto our carefully arranged Advent. And even though it might not be immediately apparent, he is intruding with a message of grace.

The scene changes to the wilderness along the Jordan river, north of Jerusalem, where we find John, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But isn't it curious that before we get to the wilderness, before he names John as the leading character in Act 2, before we get to the content of John's message, Luke takes us through this roll call of figures who are not even seen on this stage—from the highest and most powerful figure, the Emperor in Rome, to the governors and petty rulers of the small client states of Palestine, to the religious leaders in the Temple in Jerusalem. These powerful rulers may be off-stage and unseen, but their presence is always felt. Some of these characters will, of course, be brought back on the stage in the final act of this narrative, most notably Pontius Pilate. But already, at the outset of the story, we get a foreshadowing of the political and religious arenas in which this story will unfold.

Luke not only situates this part of his narrative in a specific historical context, he also indicates that he is keenly aware of the centers of power in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, powers that ruled Rome and Palestine and the Temple. He is not naïve. He understands power structures. And so, Luke makes it very clear that it is into this context, into the world of fixed centers of powers and power structures that the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah.

But Walter Brueggemann wants us notice something. "The word of God happened," he says, "but it did not happen to any of the power elite just names, nor in their courts or offices. It happened to John, son of a barren woman and of a disbelieving old man. It happened, not in the lap of luxury nor in the setting of enlightened management, but in the wilderness where the power elite is unable to work its will, where it is powerless to make things happen or to keep them from happening. It happened, not to ones who are in charge, but to a poor man in a context of forlornness. From there comes news." (*Interpretation*, 30.4, Oct 1976, p.406)

In her novel *Wolf Hall*, and in two sequels, the British author Hilary Mantel tells the story of Thomas Cromwell, a commoner who rose to power in 16<sup>th</sup>-century England and became the chief minister to King Henry VIII. Cromwell is able to climb to such political heights because he understands power. He knows how to navigate through the power centers of Europe, in London, Paris, and Rome, as well as the centers of power in his own nation, from the aristocratic nobles who control so much of the military power of the land, to the bishops of the church who control much of the wealth, and even to the intimate life of Anne Boleyn, who controls the dynastic desires of a volatile King Henry. He knows that a word from his king, or from Pope Clement or Emperor Charles V can alter the very structure of the known world.

And yet, there is a scene where he is meeting with his old friend and counterpart, the ambassador of Emperor Charles V, and they are discussing the threat of war between their respective sovereigns. Cromwell is thinking to himself: "The fate of peoples is made like this, two men in small rooms. Forget the coronations, the conclaves of cardinals, the pomp and processions. This is how the world changes: a counter pushed across a table, a pen stroke that alters the force of a phrase, a woman's sigh as she passes and leaves on the air a trail of orange flower or rose water." (*Wolf Hall*, p. 499)

Reading these books, and reading this scene in Luke's Gospel, I can't help but wonder about the centers of power in our own time. We tend to think of Washington, D.C., the White House, the Capitol Building, the Supreme Court as the center of political power; the Pentagon, or the CIA as the center of military power; Wall Street and the Federal Reserve as the center of economic power. But as Cromwell reminds us, the fate of millions of people is often set in the back rooms of the Senate or House chamber, where the pen strokes of lobbyists shape health care legislation or tax codes, and set our national energy policies.

And what this reading from Luke calls us to see is that the word of God continues to come into our world in ways that call into question the fixed centers of power. Luke places his gospel

narrative in real time, in a specific and concrete context of real-world politics and economics and social structures, and he wants his readers to understand that the transforming word of God that came to Isaiah back in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE is still relevant in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, and will remain relevant in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the administration of Joe Biden. The text calls us to think in terms of our own context, to understand that the word of God comes to us on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December in the year 2021 and will continue come on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> as well.

Like Luke, we should not be naïve. There are certainly centers of effective power in the world that affect the lives of us all. The fate of millions of people, in this country and around the globe—civilian as well as military, merchants, teachers, mothers, children—are affected by the word of Gen. Mark Milley and President Joe Biden. The financial fate of many is affected by the word of Fed Chairman Jerome Powell. Access to affordable healthcare is affected by the word of dozens of Senators and Representatives. It would be naïve to suggest that these words do not, in some way or another, define our reality.

But what Luke is suggesting is that the reality that these centers of power define is not secure. What Luke is envisioning here is not only a different *center* of power, it is a different *kind* of power—the power not of military force, or political pressure or economic power, but the power of repentance and forgiveness. The power of change and release. The power of an intrusive, disruptive grace. Walter Brueggemann points out that this “alternative world” that Luke is suggesting is “embodied in the poor cousin that bears the word” but also “in the richly forgiven woman (7:50), in the welcomed son (15:24), in the tax collector restored (19:1-10), and supremely in the one who preaches good news to the poor (4:18 f).”

The word of God came to John in the wilderness. And it is a continuation of the word that came to Isaiah; it is prologue to the word that became flesh in Jesus Christ. And that word is that God is so determined to move us to a better place, a place of true peace, that sometimes the grace of God is intrusive and disruptive. John’s message is one of peace, but it comes with a warning. We can’t really be at peace as long as we’re at ease and comfortable on the top of the mountain while the greater part of humanity struggles through the dark valley. The peace that God promises doesn’t come until the curves of injustice are straightened out. The message that John delivers of God’s intrusive grace is that sometimes we have to be roughed up in order to be smoothed out, the way rough sandpaper works on a piece of fine wood; the way the refiner’s fire burns away the impurities to produce a purer gold.

The way that John calls us to prepare runs not only through the centers of power, but also through the center of our heart. And in this Advent season we are, once again, called to be outposts of that wilderness, to prepare the way of the Lord by becoming an alternative center of power. But not the kind of power that we usually think of. The center of power we are called to be is not the same as Wall Street, or the White House, or the Pentagon. We are called to be an alternative community, a center of the power of repentance and forgiveness, of transformation and release, of change and reconciliation.

Let us pray:

God of our salvation, you straighten the winding ways of our hearts and smooth the paths made rough by sin. Keep our hearts watchful in this Advent season, and bring to completion the good you have begun in us and in the world, through Christ who comes to us in unexpected ways. Amen.