

Luke 3:1-14

Normally I start a sermon with an illustration that could apply in some way to the text. But there is no time for that today. There is too much to cover in our Gospel reading. So I am just going to pretend I just told you a story and you all responded, as good Lutherans, with peels of laughter and ‘amens.’ Alright, thank you, thank you, I’ll be here all week.

Our reading starts with a whole bunch of names that are hard to pronounce and as we casually read it, we don’t know who most of the people are or where the places are. Unless any of you knew off the top of your head who Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene was. I sure didn’t. It is often fruitful to look these names up, but more often than not as we read our bibles, we are more tempted to glaze over on these sections and move on to a part we can comprehend a bit more. That’s OK, it’s human nature.

But please, when you get to these parts of the Bible, if you don’t look up these historical figures and locations, at least ask yourself this: Why did Luke put it in there? To show off? No! To pin the events of the Bible to real historical times and places. Luke was a doctor, he investigated, he thought methodically. So he went back and interviewed the eyewitnesses to put together an ordered account so that a

guy named Theophilus, who he originally wrote this Gospel for, could know that these things really happened! And guess what, it serves that same purpose for you!

Why do we believe our “book of fairy tales” and not the other religions’ “book of fairy tales”? Because ours is linked to real people in real places, many of whom we know really lived and have evidence for. Furthermore, this knowledge is public, the preaching was public, the events public and several corroborated by extra-biblical (not-the-Bible) writings, and the reaction to these events was public.

People can deny the resurrection of Jesus all they want, what they cannot deny is that, for some reason, around 30 something AD, a whole lot of people started going around saying Jesus rose. This Gospel of Luke is not one person getting a revelation and then telling us about it, no, the Gospels are eyewitness testimony of public events. That’s why Luke puts those names and places in there, and whether we look them up or not, lets at least appreciate that much from our Gospel lesson today. Let us be thankful for this word of God rooted in time and space.

Now we roughly transition from the names of those we might be a bit confused by, to a name many of us know well: John the Baptizer. And while we know his name, and while many of us, I think, know what his job was – to prepare the way of the Lord - I found myself wondering, “what does that mean?” Or perhaps more pointedly, “what did his ministry accomplish?” Now, of course, John’s ministry was prophesied to happen, that’s why Luke puts the quote from Isaiah in his

Gospel. And John certainly fulfills that prophecy. But why did God send the last Prophet right then?

If John the Baptizer didn't come before Jesus, would Jesus' ministry have failed? I don't think so. But would it have been different? As I pondered this hypothetical, I came to the conclusion that it very well might have been. I think the most significant reason for this is that some of Jesus' disciples were actually first disciples of John. John's ministry tilled the soil for so many people that turned and followed after Jesus, especially after John says, immediately after our reading, "that One is coming that is greater than him." Go look to him! And at the very least, two of The Twelve disciples were once disciples of John (John chapter 1). Even more, when the apostles need to pick a new apostle after Judas goes his own way and dies, Acts chapter 1 tells us they need someone who was there from "the baptism of Jesus by John until the resurrection." And they sure wouldn't have seen the baptism of Jesus by John if they weren't out listening to John. And John's influence goes beyond the disciples. We see it in Jesus' trial, that he is sent to Herod Antipas, who is eager to see and hear from Jesus because, as Herod tells us earlier, he thinks Jesus is John reincarnated. So I think John's ministry does matter. It impacts so many in the region of Jerusalem and the Jordan and prepares the way of the Lord for disciple and skeptic alike.

And the content of his ministry matters too. More specifically for us here in advent. It is no secret his ministry is “repent!” Repent means to turn. “Turn aside from your evil! You think you are saved just because your Jewish lineage?” He tells them. No, no. It is the condition of the heart that matters, the condition of the tree. And bad trees bear bad fruit, and bad hearts yield bad works. They lie, they cheat, they steal, they harbor grudges and lust and hatred and favoritism.

And so the people who went to John and said, “I admit that there is sin in my life, and I will fight against it.” And so they were baptized for repentance and they asked, “What shall we do?” And he tells them what it looks like to fight against sin. “Share what you have,” he says. And of course because we are modern Americans we want to politicize everything. So this condemns those from one spectrum who don’t want to help anyone, but yell at them to “get a job” as if there was never a time in their life that if some hardship fell upon them, they wouldn’t need help. But then the other side cries, “look we should be socialists!” But, no, because he tells the government worker, those tax collectors to let the people have their due share of possessions, and the soldiers to not harass the citizens and to be content. And now that both sides are angry, John isn’t worried, because he started his sermon by calling them all a brood of vipers. “That’s not very welcoming to the visitor, John! You might push some away!” But he, bolder than I, pulls no punches and speaks the truth boldly. It’s what gets him killed, eventually – talking about

marriage, of all things. But let's not take that to mean his ministry was a failure. Jesus in Matthew 11 calls him "one of the greatest born of women." And he preaches not about politics, but about your heart.

And if our reading ended here, which it does, we might be left a bit angry that John would dare suppose us to be wrong about something and have sin in our lives. And we might leave a bit confused for what this means in advent. We might be left thinking, OK, we are supposed to fight against sin – is that what brings light to a dark world? And the answer is yes. The good works you do, do they not bring, even if a small way, some hope, and light here? Yeah. So do them!

But we know where this goes, right? Do we do those works perfectly? Are we THE Light of the World, or simply reflections of it? Are we saved on the basis of how well we fight sin? "If you win more than you lose you get in." No. What's important is that you fight, that's the law. And as we fight, we begin to see that maybe it's hard, maybe sometimes we don't want to fight that temptation, and maybe we come to realize we can't measure up. So where is our hope then?

It is in the One John pointed to. One who John says, just 2 verses after our reading today, will baptize us with the Holy Spirit, to help us. One who comes and, as John tells us, is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! So John the baptizer's ministry is not just "repent," it is "repent and look to Jesus." He, Jesus,

is the true light that is coming into the world as a different John, the disciple of Jesus, reminds us. Jesus is the One who fulfills all righteousness and brings forth a mighty salvation.

Jesus is baptized by John not because he needed to repent, but because he stands among us, among the sinners, so that he might take our place. Jesus takes our place in that he lives in this broken world and does it with perfect repentance. Then he takes our place there, on the cross. He didn't deserve to be there, we did. But he takes our place there so that he might take our punishment for all the times we didn't fight against the sin, or fought and lost, or fought and won and used it to brag about ourselves. He died for all of that. And he rose again and ascended to, as He promised, prepare a place for us, that we might be with him always. This is the goodness we celebrate at Christmas at Easter, and really every Sunday here.

And John helps us prepare for it by pointing out the darkness in us. It isn't fun or easy to admit that, but its necessary because the one who isn't sick doesn't seek a doctor. And The one who has never been afraid isn't thankful for safety. We know we are sick with sin, so lets look to the Great Physician, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And we know, and John reminds us, of the fearful things in this world and in us. Which means we can be oh so much more thankful for the One who comes to win for us the ultimate victory, and bring us, safe and sound to himself.

May we this Advent open our eyes to see the real hurt in us and in the world, as John reminds us, and repenting, may we see the beautiful good news of Jesus who comes to save. Amen.