

December 9, Advent 2

Luke 3:1-5, *From the audience to the stage*

We began the season of Advent with the disruptive apocalyptic words of Jesus. Today, it's John the Baptist who comes to disturb us. His words interrupt the scripts of the day, whether 2,000 years ago, or today. John's words pointed his listeners to a counterscript that was coming. But the counterscript begins with them. His bold and fiery invitation is a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." This baptism prepares the way of the Lord. And with this baptism, John proclaims that Isaiah's prophecy will be fulfilled: valleys will be filled; mountains will be leveled; paths made straight; rough ways made smooth. And then the best news, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Indeed, the fulfillment of this prophecy is good news. But how is it good news to hear that we have to enter into a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"? Clearly John's listeners heard this as good news, as a counterscript to the world as it was.

But I confess: I want the fulfillment of prophecy. But it begins with my repentance? Really?

To begin to get at this, step back with me. And let's take a look at crèches. (*Of course!*) What does the manger scene in your house look like? Who are the characters on display? How are they dressed? What place are they from? What time are they from?

Are there any nativity scenes that look like us? like the people at Fellowship of Hope?

If the displays we put out in Advent and Christmas of Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and magi and Baby Jesus are a stage, the characters on the crèche stage are most often representing the historical cast of characters. Other "productions" of the nativity might be characters from our time, but they don't look like us. They're characters from

somewhere else, from around the globe, South America, Africa. Of course it's great to expand our imagination, to *see* Jesus born into other contexts.

But it still leaves us in the audience, watching a cast of characters. We're watching the script of Jesus' birth being played out 2,000 years ago. Or enacted in *other* places, to *other* people, in *other* contexts.

And of course, it's right: Jesus *was* born 2,000 years ago. And of course it's right that Jesus is being born into other contexts. But it occurs to me that these nativity scenes keep us in the audience. What we *see* is that Jesus was born back *then*, and over *there*. But do we *see* Jesus being born *here*? Do we *see* Jesus being born *now*?

From our seats in the audience, the characters are no longer "real" people. We've romanticized and exceptionalized them. They aren't ordinary, everyday people. Instead they've become special, extraordinary, one-of-a-kind individuals. But they're *not* us. Our participation in the coming of the Christ child is passive; we're watching the action of others in another place and time. In a sense, we're waiting for *others* to act so that we can receive. So that we can be recipients of the benefit of Jesus coming into the world 2,000 years ago. We're waiting for the ripple effect to reach us so that we, too, can experience good news.

And into this scene, into this script, we hear Luke, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius (1), when Pontius Pilate (2) was governor...and Herod (3) was ruler...and his brother Philip (4) ruler...Lysanias (5) ruler...during the high priesthood of Annas (6) and Caiaphas (7), the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

Luke names seven characters who are on the world stage. Seven rulers. Seven *somebodies*. Seven people who are in charge of the Roman and Jewish worlds and temple.

But the word of God doesn't come to any of those somebodies. It doesn't come to any of the people on the stage, the ones being watched. It comes to John—to a *nobody*, to an *anybody*. And it comes to John in the wilderness—in a place that is *no* where, to a place with *no* audience. The stage on which God's word is spoken isn't intended for audiences, it's intended for participants, for real people, with real lives. For ordinary people. For the *nobodies* of the world. For the *anybodies*.

And it is here, in the wilderness, that John invites everyone onto the stage. *Everybody* has a part. *Everyone* is part of this production! When it comes to preparing the way of the Lord, everyone has a role. There are no starring roles. There are no minor characters. *Everyone* enters into this production through baptism, through the baptism of repentance, repentance for the forgiveness of sins. *This* is the thing that prepares the way of the Lord. *This* levels the playing fields. This baptism of repentance brings about equality and equity. It is through *this* baptism, one person at a time, that “*all* flesh will see the salvation of God.”

This “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” isn't something easy or simple. It isn't a matter of making a confession and then having water sprinkled on us. Or walking into water and being covered by it. In fact, this isn't a water baptism—it's a repentance baptism. And repentance is more like fire, like the refining fire that the prophet Malachi talks about.

So let's talk about repentance. It is, afterall, John's insistent invitation every Advent. And if we accept the invitation, this baptism of repentance puts us onto the stage in the wilderness. It's the baptism of repentance that prepares the way of the living God, the One God of Jesus.

In our context, we tend to collapse repentance with confession. In confession, we speak what is so; we name our sins; we tell the truth about who we are and who we are not.

Confession is naming and truth telling, about our sins and about who God is. Confession is a simple act, or action. Even if it's a repeating action, confession has a pretty clear beginning and end.

But repentance is not a simple action. Certainly confession is a part of repentance. But repentance isn't simple nor is it an action. And often it's only in hindsight that we see where it began. It's a process that's more like something being done *to* us. In repentance, we're being changed from the inside out. Repentance turns us, turns us around, turns us to a new orientation, turns us to face God, God's love, God's justice and mercy, God's grace and forgiveness. Repentance is transformation. In repentance, with exquisite love and grace, God is re-forming us and the ways that we've been formed by the world. In repentance, the scripts that have been running our lives are being re-written by God. And we give flesh to God's love and mercy. We give flesh to the word of God. And Christ is born.

The scripts that have formed us are scripts that say we're not enough; that we're not loveable, not by God or by others; that we don't belong; that we're nobody. These scripts de-form us. They bind us and hold us hostage. These de-formations and bindings become the source of our sins and our sinning. The scripts of the world write some people into high places and others into low places, and assign some bodies rough and crooked paths and other bodies get smooth, straight roads. And too often, our sins are our own attempts to level the playing fields, inflicting pain in an attempt to lift myself by lowering another.

But when we give ourselves to the baptism of repentance for the release of sins, the scripts that were written by scarcity and competition and violence that are running our minds and our hearts, and holding us in sin, start to be re-written. When we accept John's invitation and pass through the baptism of repentance—a long, slow baptism that takes a lifetime—we begin to find counterscripts in our minds and in our hearts. The living God is writing love

into our minds and hearts. In the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, God is bringing love and light and life into the world through us. Christ is being born. And we *see* and know the salvation of our God, not only within us, but in the world around us.

When we pass through the baptism of repentance, we begin to see and experience a leveling in the world. This leveling that is good news to some is disorienting and distressing to others. We see this at work in our world. As people on the margins begin to take their places in the center, those who have held the center feel threatened. When a black man sits in the oval office, when victims of sexual violence are given voices, when incidents of racism and racial violence are documented and posted online for all flesh to see, then those who have occupied the lifted up spaces experience loss and feel threatened. And patriarchy and white supremacy rise up, attempting to keep the high places high and the low places low.

This is what it looks like when the way of the Lord is being prepared. We aren't watching it on a stage somewhere, *we are in it*. We are *in* the baptism of repentance that is preparing the way. The voice of John the Baptist—the nobody, the anybody—reminds us each year that this event we're waiting for isn't something happening out there. It isn't an event on a stage with an audience, but an event in which *all flesh* is on stage. In the baptism of repentance, God is transforming nobodies and ordinary anybodies into beloved somebodies who belong at the center.

May we, who have already accepted John's invitation to enter into the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins... may we who have already been turned around by God's love...may we accept John's invitation again, and enter into the wilderness. May we leave our seat in the audience and get on the stage, letting God continue to turn us deeper and deeper into repentance so that Christ, the light of the world, Christ, the love in the world, Christ, the life and salvation of this world may once again be born.