

SERMON: 2 Advent, Year C

Luke 3:1-6 & Philipians 1:3-11
Preached Sunday, December 6, 2009 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

"All flesh shall see the salvation of God."

These hopeful words originally came from the prophet Isaiah. They're quoted by John the Baptist in the words of today's Gospel reading from Luke. In the season of Advent, we hear the invitation to prepare ourselves spiritually for the coming of Christ. I have issued that invitation many times and undoubtedly will again.*

But today, on this Second Sunday of Advent, I'd like to focus on the object of this statement – the thing for which we're being asked to prepare. I want to talk to you about seeing the salvation of God, and how we might go about doing that.

What does it mean to see the salvation of God? For Luke in particular, salvation is a gift for all people and all creation. When Luke talks about "all flesh," he is saying the gift is universal, freely offered to all. Salvation is not just for human beings and not just for the Jewish people, as we might conclude from reading other versions of the Gospel. In Luke, salvation means many things. It means being consoled, redeemed, healed, restored, and made whole. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? I don't know anyone who at some point hasn't longed for at least one of these things – to be restored and brought to fullness of life.

Thankfully, there is no suggestion in Luke that salvation can happen only if we buy into a prescribed formula, such as accepting Jesus as your personal Savior (as important as that may be for some people). For Luke, salvation is a new way of seeing the world and living in it. In this sense, salvation is a long journey instead of a brief moment. It's a lifelong process, not a snap decision. We're reminded of this frequently in Luke because the disciples often seem clueless about the right way to be faithful. And for the most part, it's the Gentiles rather than the Jews who catch on to what Jesus is trying to say.

*Between now and next Advent, we'll be reading and hearing the Gospel almost exclusively from the perspective of Luke. As we will learn [*learned*] in the Adult Forum today, Luke takes a decidedly historical approach to the story of Jesus and the early Church. You can hear it at the start of the third chapter of Luke as he sets the scene for everything that follows. We hear not only about King Herod and Pontius Pilate, but also the Roman Emperor and other secular governors. For Luke, Jesus comes not only to the people of Israel and Judea, but to the entire world. In the coming of Christ, God is intervening in the events of all human history, not just a small group of Hebrew people in Palestine.*

Luke suggests that if we want to see the salvation of God, we're going to have to look for it: on the world stage, and in human history. No one and no thing is left out. By approaching the Gospel this way, however, Luke creates his own potential pitfall. If God was at work in history 2,000 years ago, and Christ came for all creation, can't we also conclude that it's over? "Yes," some people might say, "God did an amazing thing long ago – but it's in the past." That was then, this is now, and the two really don't have

much to do with each other. Perhaps Christians should focus on remembering what happened “back then.” Along the way, we might at best stir up a few nice feelings and some goodwill. Maybe that’s all we should expect from Advent and Christmas.

Well, if someone reaches this conclusion, they are profoundly misunderstanding the Gospel according to Luke. God not only acted in history, God is also the author of history and, by nature, God is continually at work in it. Jesus came, Jesus turned the world upside-down, and the spirit of Jesus will never leave us. “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” For Luke and for us Christians, history is more of a circle than a straight line. That’s because what we see in the story of Jesus is the great icon of God’s interaction with us and with all Creation: how it was, how it is, how it ever shall be. To “see the salvation of God” means that we look for God’s saving work in the past, the future and in the here and now. It also means the redemption of God is never more available to us than in the present moment.

This is why in Advent, we always talk about slowing down. It’s not because slowing down is inherently good. It’s because when we do slow down, it’s easier to notice the hand of God at work in the world and even within our own souls. We don’t miss as much when we make the time to look, see and reflect.

*The writer Jan Richardson says, “The season of Advent means there is something on the horizon the likes of which we have never seen before. It is not possible to keep it from coming, because it will. That’s just how Advent works. What is possible is to not see it, to turn just as it brushes past you.”***

Wouldn’t that be tragic? God offers the gift of salvation continually, but there’s a chance we’ll miss it if we don’t pause and look carefully. If we accept that redemption is a continual process and not a one-time event, then we have to pay attention. In his letter, Paul tells the Philippians that he has no doubt God continues to be at work in their lives. “I am confident ... that the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion,” he says. “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight” (1:6 & 9). To paraphrase Isaiah and John, all creatures shall not only see the salvation of God, but also – if they choose – experience its fullness.

This past week, in one of our prayer groups at St. Philip’s, I heard a great summary of the Advent message we’re offered in the Gospel of Luke. Thomas Merton, the renowned monk and writer, once said that God called him to be “repeatedly born in the Spirit” –

*“Repeatedly born in light,
in unknowing,
in faith,
in awareness,
in gratitude,
in poverty,
in presence,
and in praise.”****

As was the case for Merton, so it is for each follower of Christ. We shall indeed see the

salvation of God by opening our hearts and souls to being born in the Spirit,
again and again and again.

This Advent, let us watch and wait – for what has already been given.

“Stay,” says Jan Richardson. “Sit. Linger. Tarry. Ponder. Wait. Behold. Wonder.

“There will be time enough for running. For rushing. For worrying. For pushing. For now, stay. Wait.

“Something is on the horizon.”

**See Isaiah 40:3-5 & 52:10.*

***Night Vision (United Church Press, 1998), p. xiii.*

****“A Prayer to God the Father on the Vigil of Pentecost,” Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (Image Books, 1968), p. 163.*

Special thanks to Mary M. for inspiration.