

Sunday Morning Worship at Brentwood – Jan 10, 2016

First Sunday after Epiphany / Baptism of Jesus

Proclaiming the Good News

Luke 3:15-22 – Sermon Text = Luke 3:18-20

***So, with many other exhortations,
he proclaimed the good news to the people.
But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him
because of Herodias, his brother's wife,
and because of all the evil things that Herod has done,
added to them all by shutting up John in prison.
(Luke 3:18-20)***

[Hymns = 403, 179, 180, 625]

In a good book, you find out early
what fascinates the author.

This week, I finished reading Anthony Doerr's novel, *About Grace*.
It's an intriguing and complex book
about a father who flees
from fear of causing the death of his young daughter.

The fascination that runs through the book,
for me at least,
is the difficulty this man has in connecting with people,
complicated by his deep desire for that connection.

That theme – desire for and difficulty in connecting with each other –
will emerge with some frequency, I imagine,
in our reflections on following Jesus in a fearful and divided world this year,
but our text this morning from Luke reveals a different fascination.

One of the things that fascinates Luke is the impact Jesus has on those in power.
It is not a pleasing or positive impact.
John the Baptist, in a sense, is the advance party,
the one who comes preaching the good news in advance
of that good news in person coming onto the public scene.
He takes on the Herod of his day directly,
naming in public all the evil things Herod had done.

John's criteria for deciding what's evil, according to Luke, are found in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. It's best summed up in the passage from Isaiah that Jesus chooses a bit later in the Gospel as the text for his first sermon in his home synagogue.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*
(Luke 4:18-19)

That sermon got Jesus driven out of his home town. Those exhortations got John arrested and thrown into prison.

That kind of public impact and reaction fascinated Luke. This good news was about a change in the way people lived together. In a world ruled by petty tyrants who ruled for their own pleasure and gain, John and Jesus proclaimed the good news of the Commonwealth of God, of a power and purpose that focused on the common good. This common good was defined by the God who created it. It consisted of justice, peace, and equity for the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. It meant a different kind of community and a different kind of ruler. This was good news for the flourishing of the whole of creation, not just for those in privileged positions looking to protect and expand their power and wealth.

That was the way of imperial Rome.
That was the way of Herod's family.
That was the way of many religious leaders in that society.

But Luke is clear, over and over again, that it was not the way of John or of Jesus. They were chosen – 'anointed' or 'baptized' – to proclaim the good news of the presence and power of God's love. They were chosen and set apart to proclaim the victory of God, the reestablishment of God's dominion that initiates the age of salvation. They are heralds and messengers of this new reign of SHALOM/flourishing. They were God's beloved who walked in God's way. And following them meant walking in that way as well.



I'm having fun searching for an image or two to use in the sermon each week.

This one was painted by Joachim Patinir, a Flemish Renaissance painter who was a friend of Albrecht Durer, whose painting of Jesus among the Elders we saw last week.

What strikes me in this painting is how John and Jesus are separated from and largely being ignored by the people representing the prosperous establishment of the time.

But their comfort is about to be disrupted by the good news of God's SHALOM/flourishing.

This good news has a cutting edge and a sharp point to it.

It is a 'winnowing' force.

It separates the good from the evil.

And the evil doesn't like it.

When that evil is embodied in political and religious powers, it arrests, and beheads, and crucifies.

The power of love in the face of the power of fear and division seems puny, insignificant, hopeless, fruitless.

That is the illusion, the blindness, that the evil powers want us to accept.

That is the way they define the world because it keeps them in power.

But the way of Jesus is different.

It is, quite simply, the way of love.

It is God's way for God's beloved creation, for the whole of God's beloved creation.

Just what that means for our lives in this day and in this place will be the focus of our fascination in this coming year.