

Sermon: That Was Then
Text: Luke 3:1-18 (As told by Anne and Jamie Dale)
Date: December 16, 2018
Context: WWPC
Third Sunday of Advent
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius . . . the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Luke 3:1a, 2b

A little over a week ago, on December 6th to be exact, a very famous national newscaster -- a man with his own prime time show and a huge national following-- took to Twitter and declared to his nearly four million followers that, and I quote verbatim, “Christmas is under siege.”

By now this declaration has become something of an annual tradition, a regular part of the Christmas holiday: Sean Hannity, declaring that the war on Christmas continues unabated.

This year, though, there was an ironic twist in this otherwise familiar story. Normally Mr. Hannity blames people who do not share his political views for starting and waging this religious and cultural conflict.

This pitched battle between godless secular liberals, on the one side, eager to drink their Starbucks coffee in bright red to-go cups decorated in --- wait for it -- **snowflakes**, the kind of people who wish the barista “Happy Holidays” when their order arrives and, on the other side, people determined to wish the clerks at Starbucks and Target and Walmart and, and, and . . . Merry Christmas.

But this year Mr. Hannity did not blame his ideological adversaries for mounting this dastardly campaign to subvert Christmas and replace it with a generic secular holiday. This year he blamed churches.

Which when you think about it, is not really that surprising. It turns out that this year a whole host of churches, spread widely across the denominational spectrum and also spread widely across the country, these churches have decorated their manger scenes to draw attention to the humanitarian crisis unfolding all along our southern border.

I'm not sure how this one specific church came to Mr. Hannity's attention, but apparently it was the Saint Susanna parish in Dedham Massachusetts in particular that sparked his ire.

In the crèche that sits front and center in the chancel, the three wise men and the baby Jesus are all enclosed in cages, with a sign above them stating "Peace on Earth?"

Saint Susanna's is not alone. As I said, scores, perhaps even hundreds of churches all across the country are doing roughly similar things.

These churches, these keepers of the Christmas tradition, are simply raising the question of what it would have been like for Mary and Joseph and their holy but very vulnerable baby, if they had been met with the same treatment when they went out seeking refuge that today's would-be immigrants are met with when they arrive at the border between the US and Mexico.

It's all too much for Mr. Hannity, who believes that such moves serve only to politicize what in his view should be a strictly religious holiday.

In fairness, I should also report that many people immediately took to Twitter to fire their own shots right back at Mr. Hannity.

They pointed out the irony that this wealthy, privileged national celebrity appears more concerned about the supposed harm being done to Christmas by these nativity sets than he does about the suffering and hardship that literally thousands of vulnerable and desperate refugees are experiencing every day as they await entry into this country.

I certainly agree with that sentiment, and even more so after the tragic events of this week.

But I would also say is that if Mr. Hannity is going to be mad at churches for politicizing Christmas, he's going to be genuinely outraged if he ever takes the time to read the Bible's account of the birth of the baby Jesus.

Because in its pages he will first discover how Mary and Joseph were themselves forced from their home by a political directive -- the call for a census issued by Emperor Augustus himself.

It was an overtly political move intended to help him control and tax his subjects -- and how they were famously and repeatedly denied entry when they themselves went seeking refuge on the night that Jesus was born.

It's a lovely and sweet episode when it's acted out by your children, complete with a sad-eyed donkey. It's less funny and sweet when it happens to you.

If Mr. Hannity starts his survey of the Bible's Christmas stories in the Gospel of Matthew, he'll read about how Joseph was warned by an angel in a dream to flee their homeland, because Herod their demented local overlord, perceived the baby born to him and Mary as a direct threat to his power. And thus it was that the Holy Family joined history's long list of political refugees.

The story Anne and Jamie told for us a moment ago is not technically a Christmas story; that is, it's not about the birth of Jesus.

But we nevertheless read some version of it every year. Because every year on our journey to Bethlehem, the traditional Advent texts take us on a detour out to the desert for a nose-to-nose encounter with John the Baptist.

The reason is simple. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us, it was John who was sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

It's worth revisiting how this rather hair-raising story opens because how it begins is critically important to everything that follows. And by everything, I mean the entire Gospel, including how it ends.

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 in Jerusalem, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Like all the best story tellers, Luke takes great care to establish this story in place and time. But even more specifically than that, he fixes it in relationship to the earthly power that be, both to the political elite of the day and the religious elite, to the global powers and the local powers, to the rulers in the capital and the rulers in the temple.

Which is to say, a world that to his original audience, felt like it had gone awry, a world that had been invaded by a hostile power, a power that did not recognize or respect the moral and religious and cultural values that the people had always held so dear.

Values and traditions and practices that made them who they were. Values and traditions and practices that now even the priests themselves had compromised and monetized in order to curry favor with their political overlords.

Which is to say, a world just like ours.

To give you a sense of how Luke's original audience would have heard this story, let me reframe it for our time. This may be a bit startling for some of us, but this is exactly in keeping with Luke's intentions, and with the spirit of his gospel story:

In the second year of the presidency of Donald J. Trump, when Paul Ryan was Speaker of the US House of Representatives and Mitch McConnell was the Senate Majority leader, and Roy Cooper was governor of North Carolina and Esther Manheimer was Mayor of Asheville, when Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell Jr. were the spokesmen for the Evangelical Church in the United States, the word of God came to, let's say, the Rev. Dr. William Barber in a small church in Goldsboro, NC.

That is the context that Luke establishes here. And with that groundwork laid, God's own prophet steps out onto history's stage, and this is the first thing he says,

“You brood of vipers.”

The Methodist writer and commentator, Debie Thomas calls John the Baptist “the bearded killjoy of Christmas.”

I think most of us would agree with that assessment. But somehow this does not bother Ms. Thomas.

She writes: “The fact that his austere words come to us every Advent is both remarkable and refreshing. I don't know about you but I don't get called a ‘viper’ very often, and I have to confess, something in me perks up.”

I can't say that's true of me. Every year when the time comes for us to hear from John, my inclination is to run and hide.

I have to actively resist the temptation to look for my joy on this Third Sunday of Advent in more reliable, and much safer places.

Maybe hunker down in a Starbucks somewhere, drinking my peppermint mocha latte from a red to-go cup decorated with snowflakes, listening to George Winston play his version of *Jesu' Joy of Man's Desiring* on a repeating loop through my headphones.

But of course that was not what happened back in the day. The people did not run away from John, they ran toward him. The text tells us that the people streamed out of the capital to hear him.

Which raises the question, why? If all he does is shout at them, and berate them, why are they so eager to hear him?

Because they're desperate, that's why. Because they have nowhere else to turn. Because their lives are so devoid of hope and joy that they're willing to risk being yelled at by a man who appears slightly deranged, on the slim chance that he might offer them a way out.

You can hear it in the questions they ask, after John is finished telling them they'd better get their act together or they're going to be in big trouble.

The crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"

The tax collectors: "Teacher, what should we do?"

The soldiers: "And we, what should we do?"

Those are the questions people ask when life is no longer working for them.

What should we do?

When all the things that give us meaning, all the customs and traditions we've known and trusted our whole lives have come crashing down around us:

What should we do?

When the world around us feels like it's been invaded by a hostile power, and the world inside of us feels like it has gone completely askew:

What should we do?

There's only one thing to do. Repent. Turn your lives around. Open your hearts and your borders to the stranger seeking refuge. Because to a very large degree, loving your neighbor as you love yourself is to what this whole show is about.

So when you lose that, when you close your hearts and your borders, you risk losing your humanity along with it.

And that is true whether you hold the highest office in this land, whether you are national-level newscaster with a huge following, or a national-level faith leader with a famous last name. Or whether you're just an ordinary citizen living right here in Swannanoa, hoping to do your best in the world.

When you're headed down the wrong track, the first thing you've gotta do is turn around and head in the other direction.

But after John issues his rather ferocious call to repentance, the answer he gives to the people's rather desperate question is so surprising, so pastoral, it's almost tenderness.

What should you do?

“Share what you have. Collect only what is fair. Be honest and true. Serve with virtue.”

Which is to say, Don't stay out here in the wilderness, because the Messiah isn't here. And I am not the one you're looking for. So go back into the city. Back into your own lives. Be who you are, the best version of you, you can be.

Do what you do. Live the life God has given you to live. Do the work God has given you to do.

Because that is where you will find that God is waiting for you, and that is where the Christ will be born anew inside of you.

And that is where you will find your joy.