

Luke 3:1-6

1 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, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

*5 Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”*

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, creator of the stars of night and our everlasting light, and the Lord, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. Amen.

‘Give Thanks with a Grateful Heart,’ the words of one of my husband’s favorite hymns were written by Henry Smith in 1978. He and I first sang this song at Our Saviour in Utica in our early dating times. *Give thanks with a grateful heart, Give thanks to the Holy One, Give thanks because He’s given Jesus Christ, His Son. And now let the weak say, ‘I am strong’ Let the poor say, ‘I am rich Because of what the Lord has done for us.’* These words repeat several times and make up the whole song. This simple song has often moved through my mind and heart over the past year. It is not always easy to ‘give thanks with a grateful heart.’ Life gives us a lot of lemons along the way – surely over the past year each of us has experienced some ‘sour’ times when making lemonade from those lemons or giving thanks with a grateful heart wasn’t what we felt like doing. And yet as we journey through Advent in preparation for our celebration of the birth of the Christ Child, it is good to remember to give thanks.

In these days of yet another COVID variant as we approach two whole years of pandemic, darkening light and colder temperatures, another school shooting in the news, and as I write this snow starting to fall outside my window, one may wonder what is there to give thanks for. Paul, on the other hand, sat in prison awaiting another trial and facing possible death, still found much to be thankful for, even joyful about. In her commentary on today’s Philippians lesson, Carla Works, New Testament Professor at Wesley Theological Seminary, considering Paul’s actions against the worldly rules of the day, writes, *‘Paul deserves death. He has been going around the empire preaching that there is a king other than the emperor...he and his associates are turning the world upside down and preaching another king, Jesus.’* When we read on into Chapter 2 Paul boldly claims, *‘...at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.’* This included everyone, even the world leaders of the time like Caesar. Risky actions to be sure.

As I read Paul’s words to the Philippians I wondered if stepping into Paul’s shoes, could I even begin to write one word of encouragement to my fellow believers. If we apply our worldly standards, indeed Paul may have not had much to be thankful for. Nonetheless Paul is grateful and he finds the words to encourage the people of

Philippi in their faith as well. He is actually joyful, sharing his warmth and love for a community of faith that both stands by and is supporting him while he's in prison. Paul tells his fellow believers that he thanks God every time he remembers them and is constantly praying with JOY in all his prayers for all of them. Why? Because the Philippians share in the gospel. Together they share in God's grace and a love for the gospel. Together they are helping to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. They do this irrespective of the challenges and threats of the world around them. Despite all that may be wrong in their lives, despite unfair rulers and possible retribution by political and religious rulers, they live their faith boldly, because Paul and the Philippians have confidence in God's continued presence with all of the faithful. For this they are ever thankful.

Don't we also share in this faith? Do I hear a resounding 'Yes.' Or maybe a less solid 'maybe?' Advent provides us a time for reflection, a time to be reminded of God's amazing gift of the Christ Child, a Savior, given for each one of us. A gift that came not in time of peace and all being wonderful in the world. Rather as our gospel lesson reminds us, the good news comes to a world that is captive to earthly forms of domination and influence. A world not much different than our own.

Luke's words today begin, as Audrey West puts it, with an '*A-list of Earthly Powers: an emperor, a governor, three tetrarchs and two high priests,*' the rulers of the day in the time that John the Baptist begins his ministry of calling people to repentance. It is one of many places in the bible where we read a chronology of history. I am often tempted to skip over these parts as unimportant, plus they often have names of people and places I can barely pronounce. It is the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius – Tiberius Claudius Nero, the 2nd emperor of Rome who ruled from 14 – 37 AD. He provided good government. Judea is ruled by the Roman governor, Caesar - appointed by Tiberius, and the Jewish leaders operate under Emperor Tiberius. These leaders – political and religious helped to shape the world of that day. The people are living under Roman law and rule in a world that is far from perfect. This introduction helps us understand the context of history and serves as a reminder that God is ever present in the best and worst of times. Throughout his gospel Luke reminds us that God does not remain distant from the world, rather God comes in the midst of this world.

While the people are living under Roman law and rule in a far from perfect world, John, the son of Zechariah hears the word of God in the wilderness. With a little

math we know that the time is 29 AD. God calls this prophet, not from a mountain top or a meadow filled with flowers, but from the wilderness. The word ‘wilderness’ or a ‘deserted place’ is often used in the Bible to represent vulnerability, uncertainty. In Luke it is a place of testing, danger and destruction or a place or sense of feeling lost. Into this wilderness with its backdrop of Roman rule, poverty, persecution and all the challenges of that day, people are called by John, the Baptist to repentance – to turn around and be transformed that they might be ready. John is calling people, including us, to hear again the Old Testament prophesy of Isaiah, of Malachi and others. He doesn’t just want the thousands who come to hear him, to climb into the river and be baptized – he wants to see lives changed /transformed. John calls us to listen differently, to respond differently and to really see what it is that God is inviting us to be ready for – eternal salvation.

Through the words of our gospels and Paul’s words to the Philippians and others, we are assured that this is indeed true. We know the angel Gabriel came to Mary and that indeed Jesus was born in Bethlehem. We have walked the road to Calvary with Him and celebrated the resurrection. As the prophet Isaiah foretold - the world was indeed changed – ‘every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough made smooth, and **all** flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ God continues to invite us to be ready and to prepare for the change that is coming.

It is these promises that Paul’s faith stands upon and in which Paul joyfully gives thanks. Advent is more than a time of preparation for Christmas and the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child, it is also a time to open our hearts more to Christ and to remember God’s promise of salvation. It is a time to consider the amazing gift God has graced us with – His only begotten Son that we might believe and be saved. How can we not ‘give thanks with a grateful heart?’ Advent reminds us that God’s plan for our lives is unfolding, even if we don’t see it. Within the context of our historical times, amidst all the bad and good things happening, there is the much bigger, but often less visible power of God. Lives are changed every day because of Christ, people are healed, eyes are opened to new realities. God calls us to be agents of transformation, to hold fast to the love of Christ, to share in the gospel with one another and those around us. Through each of us, God’s hand touches peoples’ lives. It is our hands that help deliver God’s works of change in the world. It is through our faithfulness openly lived out that others come to know the amazing love of Jesus Christ and God’s constant presence in all times. For all of this we can be

thankful. The assurance of God's promises allows us to give thanks for our fellow believers who sustain, encourage, and support each one of us in times of despair, challenge, disappointment and times of joy.

As we continue our Advent journey, let's take time to draw apart for a little while, to read scripture more, to breath slowly, to let the promise of God fill our lungs with fresh air. Let us take stock of what really matters and give thanks. May we let go of those things that don't truly matter and give thanks for open spaces in our lives. May Advent provide a time to consider how we bear fruit worthy of repentance and worthy of living in God's kingdom. May we with Paul and the people of Philippi pray with joy, share in the gospel, and remember God's grace that as Paul prays *'our love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ we may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.'*

May we indeed, 'Give thanks with a grateful' heart for the coming of the Christ Child! Amen