

## Somebody Coming

Zephaniah 3:14-20 & Luke 3:1-18

*Third Sunday of Advent/ 12<sup>th</sup> December 2021*

In today's Advent pageant, the spotlight is on John the Baptist, prophet, preacher, preparer of the way. John doesn't have a part in our Christmas pageants, although he's certainly part of the Christmas story. As a baby in his mother's womb, John leaps at the sound of Mary's greeting to Elizabeth (Lk. 1:44). But John the adult, well there's no room in the inn for him at Christmas, his place in the drama of redemption will come soon enough. The presence of grown John in a Christmas pageant would mess with the chronology, of course. He doesn't seem to fit, to fit in. Then why, you might ask, do we have to hear this text two weeks before Christmas with its message of repentance when all we want to hear is "Merry Christmas!" John is a killjoy, we think, and he's odd and weird and always angry. He sounds like Scrooge-like, "Keep Christmas in your own way, and let me keep it in mine."<sup>1</sup> And who likes to be called a viper? But it's not Christmas. It's Advent. And this is his day.

So why do we have to hear from him? Because "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, *the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness*" (Lk. 3:1-2)! Why do we have to listen to him? Because he knows how to prepare for Christ's advent. He knows what the life of Christ means for the world and the powers that be; he knows what the coming of Christ means for the world and the powers that be. For "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Lk. 3:6)—which includes you and me. John shows us how to receive the One coming toward us. Yes, we need to listen to him because the word of God—the life-giving, creating, and recreating word of God—came to John. Not to the Emperor, not to the governor, not to the territorial rulers, not to the leaders of the temple, not to the rich and powerful—*no*, the word of God came to John, this nobody, this odd man living on the margins of society, not to the rich and powerful. Luke is very clear about this. He wants us to know this.

Luke's Gospel anchors the story of John and Jesus in history, within the story of the Roman Empire – Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas—together, represent the powers that be. Their presence sets the stage for John and Jesus. We will hear their names again throughout Luke's Gospel. They represent the forces that will oppose both John and Jesus. Luke writes like a historian; both his Gospel and the Book of Acts follow the style of historians from antiquity.<sup>2</sup> Luke places John and Jesus on the stage of world history, within a particular context. But then he does something extraordinary. He turns our perspective inside out. Luke views the drama of world history in light of the message of John and Jesus. In other words, Luke reinterprets history in the light of the gospel. The world, constituted by political, economic, and religious powers, is now judged by the gospel, God's good news breaking into our day like the dawn (Lk. 1:78-79), and the world is seen in a new light. The gospel casts everything in a new light allowing us to see the injustice and corruption in the halls of power. God moves history, and God's salvation comes not through the halls of power but through people on the

margins. By the time Luke wrote his Gospel for his community, all seven of the men listed at the beginning of Luke 3 were dead, while those that follow Jesus and his way persist and flourish.<sup>3</sup>

This is the reason why John preaches repentance—meaning a change of mind or perspective or attitude—and why the call to repentance should be heard as good news is because we are being asked to turn away from the powers that oppress us and align ourselves with God’s vision for the world. God’s vision is always at odds with those invested in the present order of things. It’s why the gospel is often a threat to those in power. The gospel shakes our foundations. Luke wants us to see that the coming of Christ brings change, transformation, healing, salvation, and this change will be embodied. It will be seen and felt in the lives of God’s people. This is the reason why God’s good news always has a political dimension to it, a social, communal, as well as personal dimension, a justice dimension, and an economic dimension. The coming of Christ into the world always means change and transformation, upending the powers with a different kind of power, one of mercy and forgiveness.

Remember what Jesus read at worship in the synagogue, a pivotal moment in Luke’s Gospel “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). Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and with every eye fixed on him said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:20-21).

The advent of the one John anticipates will straighten paths and fill valleys, bring down mountains, straighten what is crooked, and smooth that which is rough (3:5). *Prepare the way for the one who is coming to offer good news and release to the captives.* It’s a message of joy, especially for those who have lost hope or were hurt by the inequities and injustices perpetrated by the empire and the religious authorities aligned with it. The world as they knew it was about to change. Yes, “somebody coming in blackness like a star,” as Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) phrased in one of her poems, somebody who is on our side, who is and will put the world to rights.

Clifton, the poet laureate of Maryland, captures these truths in her poem “john.” Clifton lived in Dickeyville and later in Windsor Hills in Baltimore. The family reacquired her Windsor Hills home in 2019 to create a center to support young artists and writers called [Clifton House](#). Raised as a Baptist, she casts John with the cadence of a Black Baptist preacher:

somebody coming in blackness  
like a star  
and the world be a great bush  
on his head  
and his eyes be fire  
in the city  
and his mouth be true as time

he be calling the people brother  
even in the prison,  
even in the jail

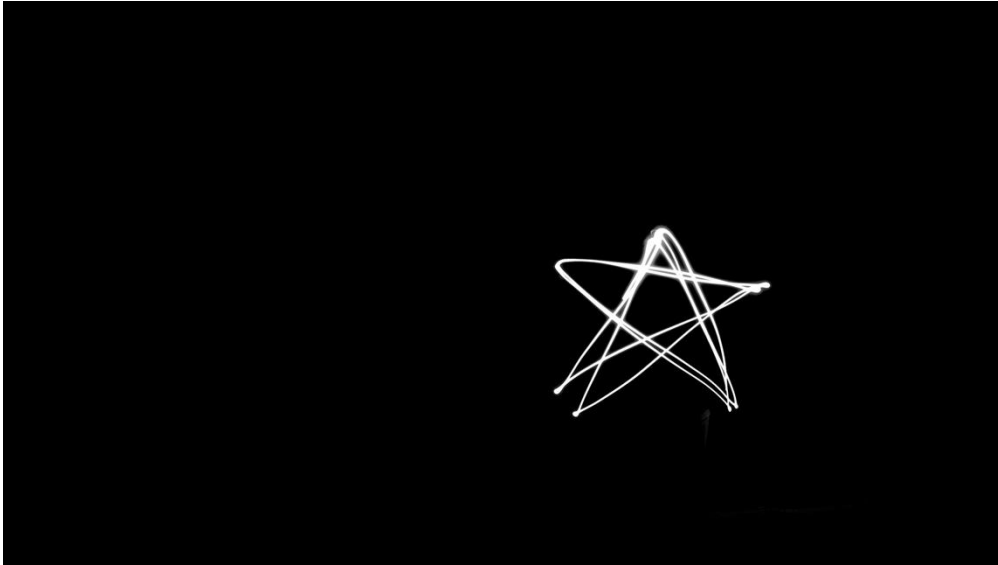
i'm just only a baptist preacher  
somebody bigger than me coming  
in blackness like a star <sup>4</sup>

In order to receive the one coming toward us, we need a different frame of mind and hearts two sizes too *big*. That's what repentance is. It entails taking a long, honest look at ourselves, examining our hearts, desires, choices, decisions, and motives. The call to repent is not to make us feel guilt or shame for something. You might feel guilt or shame, maybe for excellent reasons. However, John comes "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Lk. 3:3). And then he says to the crowd, to the brood vipers, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Lk 3:8). How do we prepare for the coming of this kind of Lord? Don't just feel sorry for yourself or confess a wrong from the past and then return to your previous life. Change. Bear fruit. Yield something worthy of the grace you have received.

"What then should we do?" they asked him three times. Here comes the change—a new frame of mind and a heart two sizes too *big*. If you have more than you need, clothes, food, resources, then share—generously. If you work for those with authority, as tax collectors do, if you have authority, power, privilege, then be honest, be truthful in your work. If you have authority and influence, if you serve at the mercy of those in power over you, like a soldier of the empire, be fair, especially if the people you serve and work for are corrupt. Use your power to do good. Share. Be honest. Be fair and just. Even if—especially if—your generous sharing, truth-telling, and justice-making are at odds with the empire around you, the powers that be, because the empire, often invested in injustice, loves to keep things the way they are.

But the good news of God shakes the foundations of everything. Whoever says the gospel has nothing to say about how we live, our choices, how we make and spend money, and how we care for and provide for our neighbors hasn't heard the gospel. John calls them to be prepared. *With new minds and hearts, they will be ready for the great undoing about to emerge on the world stage. Get ready for the one who comes to reorder the world, "where inequities are banished, valleys are lifted up, and all have the resources they need for collective flourishing."*<sup>5</sup> This was always God's plan from the beginning that we might rejoice and be glad in the justice of God, the God who renews us with love, as Zephaniah said, who causes our hearts to sing. "I will deal with your oppressors.... And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. I will bring you home, ... I will gather you in" (Zeph. 3:19-20a).

Yes, today, the spotlight is on John. Today is his day. Thanks be to God for prophets like John, and for all prophets with bold visions, who can see what we can't see or refuse to see, who help us prepare for the Christ who is always coming toward us. Like John, we place our lives in service to one greater than ourselves, and like his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, like Mary and Joseph, we yield to the one who is coming, we yield to the greater power (Lk. 3:16). Yes, "somebody coming." "Somebody coming in blackness/ like a star."



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<sup>1</sup> Scrooge to his nephew in Charles Dickens', *A Christmas Carol* (1843).

<sup>2</sup> See, C. G. Barrett, *Luke the Historian in Recent Study* (Wipf and Stock, 2009). Francois Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> David Lose, Commentary on Luke 3:1-6, Working Preacher (December 6, 2009).

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-31-6-2>.

<sup>4</sup> Lucille Clifton, "john," *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton* (BOA Editions Ltd., 1980). Listen to Clifton reading "john": <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54586/john-56d2351ad543b>.

<sup>5</sup> Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri, Reflections on Luke 3:1-18, Sanctified Art, Close to Home series, 2021.