

Living God's Love in the Real World

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The Second Sunday of Advent introduces us to the ministry of John the Baptist, whom Malachi introduces with his prophecy forecasting the refiner's fire, which is firing up a flame that can purify silver and gold to shine with a luster that can lighten the heavens and illumine the earth with the unwavering love of our faithful God. This is the story-line of the Bible that leads from the wonders of creation through the sad tragedy of our fall to God's seeking out the lost, and finding us through Jesus. John the Baptist knew the story of Israel as one of willful wandering and half-hearted repentance. Jesus, in contrast, lives God's story as one of unwavering faithfulness and amazingly gracious love.

John was rightly suspicious of the sincerity of the people seeking him out. He knew the ABC's & D's of Biblical history. Whenever things were going well, Israel would fall into *apostasy*. God's people would wander off in their own direction, seeking their own interest, and fitting in faithfulness when it was convenient. They'd wander themselves into bad situations, and wind up getting *bashed* as a sign of God's judgment. Historically, in the Middle East, that meant that one of the bullies on the block – sometimes the Egyptians, sometimes the Persians, any of the big, bad bullies that were bigger and badder than the tiny and vulnerable nation of Israel. So, they'd fall into apostasy, and then find themselves getting *bashed* as a sign of God's judgment. Then they would *cry out* to God for mercy, and God would hear their cry and *deliver* them. So, these are ABC's & D's of Biblical history: falling into apostasy, getting *bashed*, crying out for mercy, with God delivering them.

John the Baptist knew this historical pattern. That's why he often began his sermons with bitter barbs. "You brood of vipers, snakes in the grass! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matthew 3:7) Or, how about the belittling line that follows. "You call yourselves Abraham's ancestors, children of God? God could raise up a better chorus of praise from the stones you're walking on! Don't just talk about changing. Don't just offer tears of repentance. Really change! Bear fruit worthy of repentance." (Matthew 3:8) In Luke, John tells us how: share what you have; do right by your neighbor; be satisfied with what you have. John knew our story; and Jesus lived God's. John spoke of judgment; and Jesus bore it ... on the Cross. John warned of the refiner's fire; and Jesus offers himself as living water. Drinking from the water he offers will squelch the flames of judgment and quench our thirst for mercy. Jesus knows who we are. He's seen our unfaithfulness. Yet, he extends a word of mercy and embodies it with a life and a death that makes it plain that God's faithfulness is unwavering, and that love is the truth about who God is in Himself and how he acts toward us. God's faithful love – called *chesed* in the Old Testament, *agape* in the New – is the core of His character, the key to His identity, with no gap between God's word of promise and deeds of fulfillment.

Can I say it any more clearly? That's precisely what Jesus said as the Word of God Incarnate. That's what He did in life, through death, and with His life among us now. All this can sound

pretty abstract, way up in the clouds with pious platitudes and empty rhetoric. But that's precisely what Luke is resisting and refuting with this opening verse in today's Gospel. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – not the fourteenth or the sixteenth, and not during the reign of that *little boot* called Caligula – when Pontius Pilate was governor, Herod the ruler of Galilee, and Philip a tetrarch, along with Lysanias..." In other words, we're not talking about myths and legends involving ancient gods and vampire immortals. We're talking real history, our history, in this world, when the fullness of God's grace and truth came to dwell in the flesh and blood of Jesus, which was announced by his prophetic predecessor, John the Baptist. We're not talking about logical deductions proven on a black board, or theological conclusions found in text books. Nor are we talking about mystical secrets and magical incantations.

Luke wants us to know that everything we believe about the God of Israel is part of this world, in the here and now of our lives. It seems so simple, and yet, it's so very profound. The divine becomes human, not to prove a point, but to enter into our lives, to share the burdens of being human, to walk with us into the valleys, to pick us up when we stumble, to lead the way and accompany us as we find our footing and walk in the way that leads to true life. That's God's desire. God is not standing on the sidelines as critic and judge. He's not getting a bird's eye view of our lives from up in the heavens in the Goodyear blimp – although if God were looking for a blimp, Goodyear's would be a great choice! Luke is telling us that God has left the insulated safety of heaven behind. The divine has entered into the realm of the human, bestowing upon this life eternal worth and infinite value. What we do and how we live matters. This isn't a waiting game, where we're biding our time until true life beings in heaven. What we do and how we live matters.

This is why of all the Gospels, Luke's is the most down-to earth and practical in calling us to care about our neighbors, to practice the love of God by sharing what we have, working for peace, standing for justice, turning the love we have for God into care and service to others. Of all the Gospels, Luke's draws the strongest connection between believing in Jesus and participating in the life of the church. The Gospel of Luke tells us about the life of our Risen Lord. The Book of Acts recounts how our Lord's Ascension turned this community of believers into the Body of Christ. The point isn't to get us pondering the profound mysteries of theological abstractions. The point is to get us to see the direct, real life connections between God's love and our lives, between the desires of God's heart and our willingness to become His hands and feet, between proclaiming the Good News and living it with the love we share.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that the divine drama we read in the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation is mostly about what we're doing. It's important to remember that the Good News of the Gospel is primarily about what God has done, and is doing still. It's just that we need to keep our minds focused on life in this world, not the next. We need to keep our eyes focused on the here and now, where real crises in faith and life arise, and opportunities knock to trust in God's presence and rely on His power. Precisely because God's focus is fixed on the here and now with us, we, in turn, need to focus on how, here and now, we can live the love God gives ... simply and faithfully ... in Jesus' name. Amen