

Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6
Second Sunday of Advent B; 12.08.24; G. Miles Smith+

When we approach Christmas in the Church, through the season of Advent, we not only encounter in the biblical story, *Mary, Joseph, and Jesus*...but we also encounter another family...*Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John*.

- So, in the Gospel of Luke, there is not only an angel that visited *Mary* to announce the conception of *Jesus*, but the same angel visited *Zechariah*, a priest in the Temple, to announce the conception of *John* to his wife Elizabeth.
- And there are *nativity stories* for both John and Jesus, although John's is much shorter.
- And both John and Jesus are located by the Gospel of Luke within the context of *world history*—during the reigns of the Caesars of Rome—and so Luke wants us to be clear that he is not talking about two mythical people but two real people within our own timeline.
- *John began his ministry* as the baptizer at the river Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And *Jesus began his ministry*...by *being baptized*...by *John*.

And so, scripture talks about John in terms of his role regarding Jesus...such that John...*prepared the way*...for Jesus. John prepared others to be able to recognize Jesus for who he really was and is. So, it is possible to recognize in the relationship between John and Jesus...the importance...even the necessity...that there be someone *for Jesus*...*like John*.

Now, if Jesus needed John in order for him to be recognized by others, then it shouldn't be surprising that *we need someone like a John to help us to recognize Jesus*. And, in fact, the very reason we are here...is because there have already been...*some ones*...who have prepared the way for us...to recognize Jesus.

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When Jesus began his ministry, *he did not do it alone*. He called *disciples* into his ministry. And these disciples later became *apostles* who called *other disciples* into ministry together. And all these disciples...like the Christians in Philippi whom Paul wrote to...were able themselves to prepare the way for yet others...to be able to recognize Jesus.

So it is possible to imagine that every person who is able to recognize Jesus...to know him...and to be changed by him...stands at the end of a long procession of others...like so many other "John the Baptists"...who have each prepared the way for another. We could say that we are part of...a two-thousand year-old *conga dance line*...hands upon shoulders...one after another...that has flowed down through history...finally finding us...to help us recognize Jesus...and then flowing right on through us potentially...toward others to follow after us.

Recognizing Jesus is not something that any of us have ever been able to do alone—no matter how much we prize our individuality and privacy. We have each been the beneficiaries of so many other forerunners in faith who have appeared in our lives to help us meet Jesus. That may be clearest when we *first* meet Jesus through some other helpful persons. But it can also become clear by the time we've reached some years of age...and have started to do that thing that we do when we've reached some years of age...looking back over our lives...and remembering...the many others...who have accompanied us in our lives...in different ways and times...including those who have made it possible...*for us to find faith*.

For example, there have been all the people who stewarded this church/chapel in all the years past--people largely unknown to us--who have prepared a way for us...by being faithful in their own time...such that this place still exists as a place of gathering and worship.

And there has been the company of one another in our own time...whose very presence here...has helped motivate us to be here...and to keep being here.

And perhaps there have been other people...and writers...and mysterious moments...which have appeared in our lives at just the right time...that have helped us begin the faith...keep the faith...or take a different direction in our faith as needed in a different time in our lives.

And it isn't over yet.

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Who have been those people for you?

Has a time come...when you need someone again...to prepare a way for you...to find faith anew...in this moment of your life?

Thank God...that we do not have to find our way to God...all by ourselves.

[For me, there have been...my parents...and all those adults in my home church...there were professors at Duke...Dr. Robert Osborn...Dr. Frederick Herzog...Dr. John Westerhoff...many clergy colleagues...especially Rev. Garland Young, Methodist...Fr Frank Reese, Jesuit spiritual director...Fr. William Bennett, my Episcopal mentor...writers like CS Lewis, JRR Tolkien, Karl Barth, Thomas Merton, Hans Kung, Henri Nouwen, Frederick Buechner, Urban Holmes, Annie Dillard, Fred Craddock, Thich Nhat Hanh, The Dalai Lama, Martin Laird, Julian Norwich, Teilhard de Chardin, Barbara Brown Taylor, Eugene Peterson, Brian McLaren, Kate Bowler, Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, John O'Donohue, U2, and most recently, Nick Cave and David Bentley Hart. And there have been countless numbers of parishioners of churches where I have attended...and churches I have served over all these years. I wouldn't be half the Christian I am if it were not for all of these people...people I have either known personally...or I have known through their writings. Some of these I sought. Some of them found me.]