

HOW THE WORD OF GOD CAME TO JOHN SON OF ZECHARIAH IN THE WILDERNESS (I Guess)

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, Year C, December 6, 2009

Text: Luke 3:1-6

“Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

How in the world did the word of God come to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness?

I don't know. Nobody really knows. There are some theories, I suppose. *Somehow* or other the Holy Spirit moved John the Baptist to speak a message about repentance and forgiveness. And his message was a forerunner to the message of Jesus, who also spoke about repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus, according to the angel, “would save his people from their sins.” And Jesus would commission his disciples, in Luke 24:47, to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations.

I am curious about just how this “word of God” came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

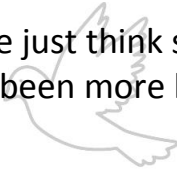
Especially since the word “wilderness” possibly means a “place devoid of words.” On one interpretation which I respect, that is the etymology of the Greek and even the Hebrew word for wilderness. When you read Luke 3:2 in Greek, you hear very similar words for “word” (rhema) and “wilderness (eremos).” It is as if it read like this: “the *word* of God came to John in the *wordless zone*.” The “dead zone,” if you've seen the Verizon commercials. The wilderness is the place where you don't hear anyone speaking to you, because there is no one there to talk to you. This idea is present in the state song of South Dakota: “where the deer and the antelope play; where seldom is heard a discouraging word”—or any other sort of word, for that matter.

The word of God came into the wordless zone, to a man who was alone. A man who wore animal skins and ate locusts and wild honey. John was out in the wilderness for some reason, and while there he got a word from God. God gave him a message, which it became his duty to proclaim. He did, all around the area of the Jordan River. Until Herod killed him.

Luke wrote the books of Luke and Acts to explain where the Gospel came from, the Gospel that was being proclaimed all over the Mediterranean world. When you read Luke and its sequel, Acts, you run into “proclaiming” very often. It is key to understanding both books.

And where the proclaiming started, according to Luke, was with John the Baptist in the wilderness, when God gave him a word in a very quiet place. Not totally quiet, mind you, but he was not receiving gobs of input from all sorts of people talking to him. He was not exactly surfing the internet.

Yet God spoke to him. How? Did he just think something, and know it was from God? Maybe. I think it might have been more like this. Allow me to try an imaginative reconstruction:



John was watching the rain.

He reflected on how useful and good the rain was. He thought about how rain serves people. Gives life, by giving us water to drink. Makes plants grow. Also washes the world, makes things bright and clean again. And he thought about how rain simply comes down from above, from the author of every good gift.

John was a good man. His parents had worked hard to achieve that. His mother and father had prayed for years for a child, and John had come to them when they were getting on in years. They had been stigmatized all their lives because they had not been blessed with a child, and his being born had washed that away. He was so precious, such a miracle, that they wanted him to be *very* good. Dad kept on him about the law of God. Mom tried to inspire him. He got the idea. Brush your teeth. Practice your zither. Come straight home after school.

But it was more and more of an effort, the older he got, and sometimes he just had to get out into the wilderness to be by himself, to get strength for the way. It was difficult being good, because the better you were the less your friends liked you, and the more critical you became of other people, and other people delighted to catch you in mistakes, and so on. He had not wanted to belong to the Sunshine Club at school. He had wanted to play football. As an adult, he had avoided the Pharisees draft, but it looked like he was going to wind up being a priest like Dad. And probably just as critical as him.

As he sat on a rock in the warm rain, John recalled the prophecy of Hosea:

Come, let us return to the LORD;
for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us;
he has struck down, and he will bind us up.
²After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
³Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD;
his appearing is as sure as the dawn;
he will come to us like the showers,
like the spring rains that water the earth."

And John had a thought. Perhaps we do not get good as the result of our strenuous and consistent efforts to obey the rules or fulfill the vision. Perhaps it is not up to us to seize our best life. Perhaps our goodness comes down upon us from above, from the one who created us, who also knows our faults and yet loves us still, the one who—according to Hosea—heals us, binds us up, revives us, raises us up. Perhaps all our machinations are less effective than simply turning—or re-turning—to God. “Then *he will come to us* like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.”

And then, perhaps (*and let me repeat that this is an imaginative reconstruction*) John decided that this must be so, and he began to urge his theory on absolutely everyone he ran across, because it made him glad to have this confidence in God, and to sense that we all have equal possibilities, even those of us whose parents were not quite as intentional as Elizabeth and Zechariah. And he was inspired to baptize people in the water of the Jordan to illustrate how God cleanses those who turn to him.

Then he got to know Jesus, who taught *just what he had been saying*, except that Jesus did not teach as if it were a delightful conjecture but as if it were in fact straight from God. In fact, he performed signs and miracles that seemed to confirm that it was indeed God who was pushing this message, that our goodness, our aura, our halo of value, is always and only a gift, equally available, through faith in God, to prostitutes and to Pharisees.

John did not have the satisfaction of seeing Jesus play his whole hand, because John got caught by Herod and killed for Salome’s sake because she was angry about people’s criticism, because she didn’t feel like a good person and so she

slashed away at the critics in order to try to make the criticism go away so she could feel like a righteous person again, *why didn't she just listen to what John was really saying?*

What John would have seen, if he had lived, was Jesus being killed for being so good that the whole world began running after him, killed by some people who couldn't stand it. Because they thought they had a corner on goodness. They loved handing out the rules and telling the vision and being the ones who measured people for haloes.

But God raised up Jesus, and certified *his* message as what was to be proclaimed to everyone including you and me. "This is my beloved Son—*Listen to him!*" We should not torture ourselves—or others—to be as good as God, or judge one another, or be defensive about our frail attempts at goodness, much less our failures, but instead hand them all to God and let him wash them, and wash us, in the holy light so that we can know ourselves as what we are: precious children of the Almighty, each and every one still of full value no matter what. And be glad.

I don't really know how the word of God came to John in the wilderness. But I know how the word of God came to me, and I suspect it came to you the same way—through water and the Word preached and taught and shared by others who told me Jesus loves me, God loves me, and through a gracious meal which is something like the gracious meal that fell like rain upon the children of Israel. People told me that although life has its ups and downs, we always deal with one and only one God, and *his will for me*, as Hosea promised and Jesus demonstrated, is life. He will heal. He will raise us up.

So when I am sorry I did something, or sorry about how I did it, or sorry about how it was taken, or sorry about my circumstances, or just plain sorry, I just stand out in the rain of God's sweet forgiveness, and I am all right again. And I extend the same grace to others. Amen.