

## ADVENT II, 2018

### Luke 3.1-6

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Some ten years ago, I attended a church conference in Winnipeg, Canada. I decided I would get there by flying to Bismarck, North Dakota and driving to Winnipeg. I had never been to either place, so this would be a new adventure in places to see.

I arrived in Bismarck and set out the next day for Winnipeg. Now, North Dakota is probably the most anonymous state in the union. Ask people to name the states and they will probably name North Dakota one of the last of all, if they remember it. It is the 19th largest state, but with only 650,000 people, is the 48th state in population (only Vermont and Wyoming have less people).

As is my custom, I took back roads to get to Winnipeg. At one point I found myself in the town of Rugby, North Dakota. The town is surrounded by flat farmland as far as the eye can see. Rugby claims no special importance, except for this: it is the exact geographical center of the continent of North America. From the top of Canada to the furthest point south in Mexico, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, Rugby is the exact center of North America. There is a monument in the town, an obelisk, to note this fact.

It occurred to me while looking around at this non-descript place that the center of everything in North America is in the middle of nowhere.

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When I read our Gospel today, Luke's account of the start of the ministry of John the Baptist, I think that if John the Baptist were to show up today, he would show up in a place like Rugby, North Dakota. Someplace in the middle of nowhere, but that God makes the center of everything, where the action is. Listen again how Luke notes the start of John the Baptist's ministry:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee ... during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Luke locates the appearance of John the Baptist among the power players of his age. Tiberius was Caesar in Rome, the capital of the world of that time. His representative in Israel was Pontius Pilate, who as governor ruled from the holy city, Jerusalem. King Herod ruled in Galilee as an ally of the Romans. Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests in Jerusalem.

These men were the movers and shakers of their time. They were the rulers, the high and mighty. Their rich and famous lifestyles were the ones everyone else sought to copy. They defined reality for the people of their time. They established order, a closed system in which all questions were settled. The cities in which these men lived – Rome, Jerusalem – were the “in-places” where everyone wanted to live and work, the power centers where all the action was. Or so everyone thought. Except God.

Where was God in all this? Not in the power centers, Rome or Jerusalem. Not trying to curry influence and power with the big boys, the movers and shakers of the day. No: God shows up out in the desert, a place in the middle of nowhere. A place like Rugby, North Dakota. Yet, it turns out, the middle of nowhere was the center of everything, where the real action was taking place.

And who is God's agent? A weird figure dressed in camel's hair, eating a weird diet of locusts and honey. Yuk. His name was John the Baptist, son of Zechariah, a priest. The text says the Word of the Lord came to him. So this is the person God chose to prepare His way for the coming of Christ. Not a man of high degree, not a media personality type, not a charismatic figure. Just a man with the courage to proclaim the Word of God, calling people to turn their lives toward the Lord God, to come under His rule, which was the good news of forgiveness and a new start in life. A man with the audacity to claim that God was about to do a new thing, outside the power and control of the political and religious power players of that time.

That's how God works. Just when men think they have God under control, shut up in a box, God shows up in some surprising place you would not expect. Like a cross. And God turns some out-of-the-way, middle-of-nowhere place into the center of everything, where the action is taking place.

Just as with John the Baptist out in the wilderness, God is at work in the out-of-the-way places of our time, working among the lesser known and least known of our time. God has His own agenda and works in His own time and by His own ways. The Church's work is nothing else but that of John the Baptist. That is why he is lifted up as an example to the Church to follow in Advent. His call is our call to the world, to any who will listen: Prepare the way of the Lord. Repent and receive forgiveness of sins. All flesh shall see the salvation of God.

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Sometimes Christians in these times despair of the situation of the Church. They worry about decline. As in the words of the great Methodist hymn, we see the Church by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed. In many quarters and corners of the Church, Christians have doubts about their faith and the ministry of the Church. It is nothing new; forty years ago, in the first month of serving at my first call, in the same week two members of the congregation said it was too bad I had to come to a dying church. Last I checked, it is still there.

So, is this a time for resignation and capitulation to the times we live in? Or is this a great time of opportunity, to make Jesus known to a world in need of good news? One theologian recently wrote:

*Ours is a deeply fractured and alienated culture. Many people, especially young people, are desperately looking around for something to ground and claim them. A place to discover and express their true identity.*

*How should the Church approach such a cultural moment? With confidence. There is a huge opening, a political realignment underway that gives us a new opportunity to be faithful to our traditions and teachings, apart from the idolatries of the secular left or the secular right. Many young people today are looking for precisely the kind of practiced, ancient, comprehensive version of the good that the Church has to offer. One that is not beholden to the political assumptions of their grandparents. They want their house built on solid ground in the midst of a culture that is at sea.*

*The Church should enter confidently into this fragmented reality — as we have in ages past — not only with a powerful and attractive message of love, non-violence, and special concern for the most vulnerable, but with the goal of giving the culturally homeless a place to call home.*

*There are some who in this cultural moment would call us to retreat. To capitulate. To those I respectfully say that you are missing the signs of the times. Far from shrinking from our tradition, far from looking for ways to sidestep the ancient teaching and wisdom revealed by God through the apostles and their successors, it's clear that this moment calls for us to embrace the gift of the deposit of faith that has been handed down to us, offering it in humility and love to a culture in desperate need.*

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This opportunity is before you, here in this place. I conclude with St. Paul's words from Philippians (1.6), today's second reading. St. Paul writes: "I am sure that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

This is God's promise to you. God began a good work in you. God is working a good work in you. God will bring it to completion. There is so much untapped potential here at Advent; you have so many gifts to employ for the work of ministry, for building up the people of God, for making Jesus known in this community and beyond. God will be at work in you, until the Lord's work with you is completed.

I am so very thankful for the opportunity to have shared these last two years in ministry with you. I will be watching and praying for you from afar as together you, your new pastor, with the Holy Spirit, write the next chapter of the ministry of Advent Church. Because Jesus is risen and lives, I know the Lord will bless and be with you in this good work until He brings it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.