

Part of the Timeline

Second Sunday of Advent
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Sunday, December 6, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Go visit the Penn Museum in Philadelphia—to be precise, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. It has an amazing collection of ancient artifacts. There are 3 gallery floors representing discoveries from more than 400 archaeological expeditions around the world. Last Saturday my family visited the museum, and, just to name 3 examples, we saw statues of King Tut and Ramses the Great, as well as (at 13 tons) the largest sphinx on exhibition in the United States.

You know what I most appreciated, however? As I entered the museum, there was a large timeline that put everything in context. I was reminded how things were happening all over the world at the same time. The Shang Dynasty in China and the development of the Chinese writing system around 1500 B.C. occurred at roughly the same time as perhaps the greatest Egyptian dynasty, which included some of the most powerful pharaohs like King Tut. Or this—the Persian Empire, which overthrew the Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C. and sent the exiled Jews back home to Judea, **and** the founding of the Roman Republic **and** the lives of Buddha and Confucius occurred at basically the same time. Those events might not have impacted one another or seem even remotely connected. Yet it was also clear from that timeline that events weren't happening in a vacuum. It was clear from that timeline that powerful rulers and influential people in many places exercised authority at the same time.

Today, our Gospel writer Luke gives you and me a timeline regarding the arrival of John the Baptist on the scene. This timeline makes evident that John's preaching in the wilderness about repentance of sins and preparation for the coming of the Lord occurred not in a vacuum, but in the midst of an ever-changing, sometimes-turbulent history. If you thought I was throwing out at you dates and dynasties, left and right, from the Penn Museum, just recall Luke's opening volley here in chapter 3: *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 Lusanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*

Phew! That's a whole lot of history in the making. Luke does not give us this information in order to flex his intellectual muscles. He's not trying to impress us with his knowledge, as if he were a walking Wikipedia. Rather, Luke sets into time—a particular point in time on the timeline of our world—the story of John the Baptist who would announce that our Lord Jesus was coming into that world.

At first glance it seems that John the Baptist is far removed from the rulers and authorities listed here. Those seven are rather an impressive group. And then there's John, a simple and devout Jew, born to Elizabeth and Zechariah—pretty common folk. Zechariah was a priest, but he was just a “lesser” priest. John was not known in any public sense until those days he began preaching in the wilderness and baptizing people in the Jordan River in Galilee. I doubt he ever would have received an invitation to a state dinner with Emperor Tiberius (although he might have been bold enough to crash it). Truthfully, the only dinner we're aware of that he had with important dignitaries—Herod ruler of Galilee to be exact—was probably the banquet, recorded in Matthew's Gospel, at which John the Baptist's head was served on a platter. Not exactly guest of honor.

So, John arrives in the midst of all this history, but we could think of him as simply a minor notation on the timeline: Born, preached, died. Except that Luke has a motive for placing John the Baptist on this timeline in the authoritative company of rulers and religious leaders. Luke wants us to know that **John** spoke with authority, too, because, as Luke puts it, “the word of God came” to him. This nothing of a man shouting “Repent,” quoting Isaiah, and declaring that his people would soon see the salvation of God—well, Luke says that in terms of authority, this John the Baptist ranked right up there with Tiberius and Pontius, Herod and Caiaphas. In fact, he surpassed them in authority. And, maybe more to the point, was at **odds** with their authority. For John the Baptist called people to acts of justice and mercy, called them to repent of sins and be humble before God. That was in direct opposition to the way those leaders did things, the way the world did things. And, of course, the One whom John said was coming—Jesus of Nazareth—would, in his own ministry on that timeline, show just how oppositional this authority of God was. Jesus would meet up with and come into opposition with the authority of Herod and Pontius Pilate, Annas and Caiaphas.

You see, the **promise** that Jesus would come into our world, and then his **actual incarnation** at Bethlehem, did not happen in a vacuum, but in the midst of an ever-changing, sometimes turbulent history—at a time when worldly powers claimed to know what's right, do what's best, and people suffered for it; at a time when God was either forgotten or diminished or shoddily reinvented; at a time when faithfulness was placed aside. Hmm... that doesn't sound so different from our time.

Look—you and I have our own timelines—our lives and our activities that move through history. And I'm asking us to consider this: Could an infant born in a Bethlehem stable 2000 years ago impact my timeline or yours? Could the authority of that child be such that it will stand out in stark relief over against our own confused conceptions of what's authoritative for us, what's of lasting value to us, what's good and true and right? I suppose these events we celebrate during Advent and Christmas **seem** to be located way in the past, at but one place on the world's timeline. Both John and Jesus: Born, preached, died. Yet we also proclaim Jesus raised from the dead. And if that's so—if Jesus now lives for all time, and if he's given his Spirit to dwell in us, then the event of Jesus Christ is a touch-point in time that extends backward and forward in time, to every generation. Even to you and me. It means that Jesus is able to touch each point on our timeline, each notation marking the events in our lives—our relationships, our thoughts, our behaviors, our failures, our challenges, our values. And he has the power to change them.

Take Malachi, whose words we read in today's first lesson. Malachi couldn't picture exactly what the Lord would look like. But he prophesied at the end of the Old Testament era about this One who was coming, and he envisioned this—that Someone would be like a refiner's fire, purifying God's people until everything they did and all that they were was right and good in the sight of God. Malachi knew that the One to come would burn away the impurities—the things that were opposed to God—and transform the people into acceptable offerings to God. This prophet envisioned the Lord impacting people's timelines in every possible way.

In our second lesson, we have Paul writing to the Church at Philippi. Now Paul **had** seen the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, and thus could very clearly picture what the Lord looked like. Paul told the Philippians how Christ was ever continuing his work among them. He prayed that the Philippians would find their love for Christ and for one another growing so much that it would simply overflow. And he wrote these words: *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.* Paul saw that Christ was touching every point of the Philippians' lives, producing in them good work—acts of kindness and compassion and generosity, deeds of justice and faithfulness. So Paul gave thanks to God for that, and then declared to the Philippians that, at the last, God would bring to completion his gracious intentions for them.

Our individual moments in time—our words and deeds and very beings—do not occur in a vacuum, but are, through our baptism, connected with and enveloped by, the event and person of Jesus Christ. That means we can be changed. That means it is possible for us to be less self-absorbed and start to think more of our neighbor. That means it is possible for us look honestly at ourselves, ask for forgiveness, and then give thanks for God's mercy and transforming power. That means it is possible for us to let go of superficial holiday trappings and instead embrace the Truth of this season who pervades both time and space and will bring about a completion of creation where, finally, all will be well. **AMEN.**