

Advent 2C
Luke 3:1-6
December 6, 2009

Once upon a time.

Long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away.

That's how stories begin. Fairy tales, myths, legends, all start with phrases like that, introductions that place them in some hazy, long-ago past, in some distant, magical place where strange things can happen -- adventures, challenges, and quests.

And at this time of year, in this season of Advent, this season of prayer and preparation, it is easy to hear the stories and songs from our scripture in the same way. Like pictures in a book, or figures on a shelf, these long-ago stories of Jesus and John the Baptist and Mary and Joseph can feel static and distant, unreal and vaguely romantic. Like a fairy tale or a legend, they seem to inhabit a time outside of time, and a place that is no place at all.

And that is really easy for us to take. Because if angels no longer fly, and prophets no longer speak, if John the Baptist is just a funny man in a camel's hair costume and fake beard, then we can set these stories aside as easily as we picked them up. We can hear them, admire the beauty of their message, and then put them back on the shelf, like a charming picture book, that really – haven't we outgrown by now?

But Luke, our beloved evangelist, says no. Luke wants us to know that these people are real, that their stories really happened, at a specific time, in a specific place. It's almost like the scene changes on "Law and Order" when that sound goes "dunk, dunk," and the place and date appear in white type on a black background. Luke lays it out for us. It WAS the fifteenth year of the reign of the emperor Tiberius. It WAS when Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests in Jerusalem.

If we were telling such a story today, it might sound like this:

In the year of our Lord 2009, in the month of September, when Jennifer Granholm was governor of Michigan, and Virg Bernero was mayor of Lansing, and Ted Stanton was city manager of East Lansing, and Lou Anna K. Simon was president of Michigan State University, during the coaching tenures of Mark Dantonio and Tom Izzo ...

Brother Jed Smock and his wife Sister Cindy appeared in the region beyond the Red Cedar River, on the sidewalk in front of Wells Hall, preaching hellfire and brimstone and eternal damnation for the sins of sex and drugs and rock-n-roll. (Want to know more? Check: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WVGXPt7DS4&feature=related>)

See, when you tell it that way, it sounds like a story. But it's not. Brother Jed and Sister Cindy were really here in September. Others have stood outside Wells since then, proclaiming whatever message of repentance and damnation they have to share.

And as wacky as their theology may seem, and as cartoonish as they may appear, the preachers of Wells Hall are human beings, just like anyone else. I know. I went to school at University of Florida with Sister Cindy Smock, back when she was a sinner. We worked together on the student newspaper. Wendell even dated her for a while ... before he met me, of course. She is just a human being ... one whose life took a very strange trajectory, but real nonetheless.

And all of these over-the-top street preachers are real people. They cry, they laugh, they eat and sleep, they have families and friends, and they do all of this while taking up space and living through history, in a specific place at a specific time.

But we tend to discount them. They are kind of crazy, after all, pacing the sidewalk, screaming at people that they are going to hell for partying and fornicating, for being socialists or feminists. They seem unreal to us, kind of scary even. Just turn your head as you pass by, don't make eye contact, don't engage, and maybe they won't say anything to us, shout anything at us, or challenge us to defend our own faith in face of their assaults.

And isn't that how we treat John the Baptist? Like one of those confrontational evangelists or Bible-thumping preachers who have cast themselves in his mold. Someone more like a cartoon than a human being. Someone strange and foreign and bizarre enough that we can think of him like a caricature of a street preacher, not anyone real enough to claim our consideration or our time.

But John the Baptist is no cartoon. He is no caricature. He is a real person, with a real message that was so compelling to those in his time and place and culture that they went out to the banks of the Jordan to hear it. To engage with John. To amend their lives. To submit to his baptism of repentance.

His message is real enough and compelling enough that it has endured throughout 2,000 years of history. Our tradition has preserved it, honored it, and passed it on from generation to generation. Because we too are always preparing the way for the Messiah – the Messiah who is always coming to us to redeem us and restore us and refresh us. We are always engaged in the work of repentance, of *metanoia*, a Greek word which means simply to turn around and go the right way.

And so we need this message of John, the call at the Jordan's banks that echoes down through the ages. We need to hear it as clearly and intensely as those folks heard it back in the 15th year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberias.

It is not the message of the Wells Hall preachers. Those who stood on the Jordan's bank back then heard a different message from the one that is shouted on the Red Cedar's bank today. Even though John could get up a good head of confrontational steam, as we will hear in the gospel lesson next week, he was not interested in who people slept with or whether they partied too hearty, or if their politics were correct.

When the crowds wanted to know what to do to change their lives, he told them to be generous ... those with two coats should give one away, and those with food should share with those who are hungry. When the tax collectors asked what they should do, he told them to stop extorting extra payments from their own people. When the Roman soldiers asked what they should do, he told them to stop blackmailing and threatening people and to live on what they earned.

That is the baptism of repentance that John the Baptist preached to our ancestors in the faith. It is not the stuff of legend, it is not a cartoonish condemnation of our lives. His message is practical. It is compassionate. And it is real, as real right here in East Lansing, on the sixth day of December in the year 2009, as it was when Annas and Caiphas were the high priests in Jerusalem.

Can you hear the call of the Baptist, ringing true and clear throughout the centuries? Can you take on the assignment he offers each of us this morning? One concrete, practical way you might begin is by taking out the bulletin insert about the Greater Lansing Food Bank. Our local food bank is struggling to keep its shelves filled. More and more people are using it, and because of more efficient inventory management, fewer and fewer food producers and distributors have excess food to give away. This year, All Saints is not only collecting a financial Christmas offering, we are also going to take up the task of helping our local Food Bank.

On this insert, you will find a list of needed foods. But you will also find suggestions on how to make this offering a means of spiritual preparation for yourself and your family. Clear out your own clutter of busy-ness and stress to make this offering a period of mindfulness and prayer. We can prepare the way of the Lord – not only by feeding those who are hungry, as John the Baptist suggested – but also by praying in solidarity with those who need our food, by acknowledging them to be real people ... as real as John the Baptist, as real as a Wells Hall preacher, as real as you or me or anyone we know and love.

This is how we prepare the way of the Lord, how we make the crooked straight and the rough places plain, just as Isaiah foretold, and just as John the Baptist embodied. We give ourselves away. We treat each person with respect. We take our part in the coming Kingdom of God's Messiah by straightening out some of the mess this world has gotten itself into. So that he can walk -- without hindrance or delay -- into our hearts at Christmas.