

This Day in History

Luke 3:1-14

Second Sunday in Advent; Series C

So there it was, sealed in selifan and stuck in the pages of scrapbook. I once heard a story about a Catholic Priest who was visiting an elderly parishioner in her home. During their visit she shared with him a scrapbook containing many important events of her personal history. The priest turned one of the pages detailing an early part of her life and there he saw it—a piece of bread wrapped in plastic wrap next to a few photos. But this was not just an ordinary piece of bread. This was the host from her first communion. Apparently, on that day when the priest told her, “Take and eat,” she “Took and kept.” And then she sealed the body of Christ in selifan wrap and stuck it in the pages of a scrapbook detailing her personal history. The Christ who comes to us stuck in the pages of history.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. During the season of Advent we remember that God, the creator of the heavens and the earth, is our God who comes to us. In particular, during the season of Advent we prepare to celebrate the coming of God on Christmas Day. It is on that day that we remember and celebrate that God came into history in a factual, historical, yet personal, particular, and specific way. He took on flesh and blood and came to us.

St. Luke reminds us very pointedly of the truth of God’s coming in human history. He is intentional and specific as he proclaims our God coming to earth. In his well-known account of the birth of our Lord he begins by planting the event firmly with the annals of history. “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered” (2:1). He gives the reader the names of governors of regions, and the names of towns important to the event. He even clues the reader in on the census customs of the time. And then with words he describes the birth of the Word become flesh at that time and place in history.

At the appointed time when Jesus begins his public ministry, the Evangelist St. Luke is just as descriptive. In our Gospel reading this morning St. Luke describes the coming of John the Baptist. He is the one who was foretold by the prophet Isaiah in the OT. He has come to prepare the people for the reign of God in the world. He has come to prepare people for Jesus. And when Luke describes the ministry of John the Baptist he gives the reader the exact year of the particular Roman emperor who was reigning at the time. And he doesn’t stop there. He tells us that Pontius Pilate was the governor, and tells us about King Herod and his brothers that ruled over various regions at the time. He even tells the reader that Caiaphas and Annas were the High Priests at the time. With this kind of historical detail it is nearly impossible not to know the particular time and place that Luke is referring to. Even sources outside of the Bible confirm the historical accuracy of St. Luke’s description. It appears that he wants to make it painfully obvious that the coming of the reign of God in this world is not just a philosophical idea. It is rooted in history. As one person I heard once put it, “It happened. It occurred. It’s actual. It’s factual. It’s

very truth of very truth, historical, not made. That is the unique feature of the Christian religion” (Rossow, *Gospel Handles*).

But the coming of the reign of God into human history through the person of Jesus was never meant to be trapped in the pages history. It was never meant to be just an historical event. But I think we sometimes prepare for Christmas Day and celebrate the Day of God’s coming to earth as if it is just an historical event that once happened. In this way we may hold the day and the event at arm’s length by seeing it merely as a day to play nice with the relatives, give gifts, and eat a well prepared meal. And then the day is over. And so the season and the celebration is over. Christmas goes back into the box until next year. The relatives drive home. The decorations are put into storage. The gifts go onto the shelves or into the closets and the leftovers are shoved into the fridge. It is another day in our personal, family history. The memories of that day are then placed in the pages of the scrapbook.

When John the Baptist speaks in our Gospel lesson of the reason for Christmas Day, it becomes clear that the coming of God in the flesh is too important to keep at arm’s length and relegate to the history books. This is because the problem that he has come to address is not a problem that we can hold at arm’s length.

As St. Luke records it, in a particular time and place in human history, God came. And he used a particular person to personally prepare the people for his presence. And he gave this person a word, a message, to speak on the edge of the wilderness—“Repent for the forgiveness of sins.”

God has come into human history not so his coming can *just* be romanticized, sentimentalized, or depersonalized. The elderly woman at the beginning of the sermon didn’t receive the body of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins *the way* that Jesus intended—“Take and eat.” But she did have right idea by putting Jesus in the moments and events of her personal life history. God wants his Son to visit your life.

Jesus has come personally to deal personally with the problem of pride and human rebellion that has set us at odds with our creator. He has come to the wilderness of your lives to deal with your moral messiness, your blind business, and broken relationships. He has come to deal with our sin. It is a problem that we cannot just stuff in our past and relegate to the pages of scrapbooks. The problem won’t go away! And it is *not* a problem that we cannot solve on our own.

John speaks of this Jesus, the Son of God, who comes to us and he says, “He who is more powerful than I is coming” (3:16). Our Creator God is powerful enough to split the heavens and come down to us through his incarnate Son to deal personally with your moral messiness, blind business, and broken relationships. Your moral messiness, your blind business, and your broken relationships have broken the body of Jesus. But he is powerful enough to forgive it all.

He came into history to do just that. And St. Luke describes it all. The cast of characters included Judas Iscariot, Pontius Pilate, King Herod, Barabbas, Simon of Cyrene, two thieves on a cross, a centurion, and

Joseph of Arimathea to name a few. The time was during the Feast of Passover. The place was called “the Skull,” right outside the city gates of Jerusalem. There God in the flesh stretched out his arms that a whole world might be enfolded within them. It was an historical event of personal importance. There, in a personal way, the once for all sacrifice was offered—a sacrifice powerful enough to reach into your past and forgive your moral messiness, your blind business, and your broken relationships. “God who is faithful and just has forgiven your sins and cleanses you from all unrighteousness” (1Jn 1:9).

As the writer of Hebrews says, “Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8). This means that when our God comes personally for us, he comes to stay. And when this powerful person of Jesus comes into your life to stay—your whole life changes. He comes in Christ to forgive your pasts, empower and enable you in your todays through his love and forgiveness, and he has come to secure your futures. So now you live in hope of the Day when God will come again to usher you into an eternal future that he has secured for you. You live now in the Christ who comes personally and sticks himself in the midst of your broken, messy life. Receive his grace and live in his grace each day as a participant in his Word and Sacraments. Receive Christ as he comes to you. Amen.