

Luke 3:1-6 December 7, 2018

When was the last time something that didn't make sense & catch your attention? Did its image have contradictory message? How was that possible?

Humor and advertising have something in common. Both rely on contradiction to make a point. The humorist will take a commonly shared experience and will look at it in a new way. Voila!! The contradictory nature of the experience is laid bare. Everyone laughs because they see the absurdity through the eye of the humorist. Ditto, advertisement. Place two contradictory images together, according to the logic of the advertiser, and the public will stop to look. But look around the logic is still effective. Before the public appearance of Jesus, a hermit preached in the desert. The preaching and the place created a sign of contradiction. And a way to catch the imagination of the people. John traveled up and down the Jordan River valley. Everywhere he went, he proclaimed "Get Baptized" This will show everyone you turned your hearts and lives over to God, so he can forgive your sins!

Luke presented a contrary sign as proof of God's activity a cryer of news in the desert. A news cryer was an urban activity. People gathered in the marketplace to hear the news from the traveling cryer. But, the desert (literally, deserted areas) was no place to announce news of importance. Such a place hid many dangers and traps. Only the hermit endured such environs. Yet, the combination of the two images (a messenger in the desert) recalled the Exodus experience and prophetic tradition. If there was a place to hear news from God, it was the desert.

Of all the evangelists, Luke had the greatest concern for history. Beginning with the political situation in the known world, the Roman

Empire, Luke reduced his focus from the general to the particular. Luke wanted to pinpoint the person of John the Baptizer. He also wanted to raise the historical significance of John's activity. The word of God stirring in the Jordan had the same, or even greater, impact than anything that Caesar did! Luke accomplished this feat by name dropping and with the use of a single sentence. John went into the entire country around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism for the purpose of the forgiveness of sins. "A voice crying out in the desert". This is an emphatic statement. The prophet used the image of the town crier or advance man, announcing the coming of the king. The image urged the people to prepare for the judgement day.

The image of straightened roads, filled ravines, leveled mountains and roads where none existed before remind us of the public works projects for the benefit of a visiting dignitary. When a king would visit an area, roads were cleared, branches were cut back along the roadside, ruts were filled in, new roads were developed, ravines filled in and hills leveled. The improvements meant to impress the visiting royalty and provided for his or her traveling comfort.

After Luke justified the activity of John as a historical event, he moved to justify the activity in Jewish tradition. Even though the Roman Empire condoned anti-Semitism when Luke wrote his gospel, the general populace still had great esteem for the moral life of the Jews. While they might not understand Jewish mentality and its insistence on monotheism –or ONE God they did respect its stature as a religion with a tradition. In ancient culture, tradition was paramount, for it represented lasting values and lasting lifestyle.

Writing for a non-Jewish audience, Luke appealed to that tradition. Luke gave his audience and possible converts a sense of place. The new movement fulfilled that of the old. Followers of the Way were not God's people.

John received the word of God to preach a baptism that led to the forgiveness of sins. In other words, John's baptism was symbolic. It represented a reorientation on the part of the sinner toward God. But it did not forgive sins in itself. The baptism looked forward to an act of divine mercy at the last judgement. Somehow, some way, the repentant sinner hoped God would wipe the slate clean as he stood before the Son of Man in the Last Judgment.

John activity meant to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy. A desert cryer called people to prepare the way for the King of Kings. The road was to be made wide, made smooth and made new. The improvements made were internal as well as external. The sinner was to reform in heart and deed.

What strikes you most about the figure of John the Baptizer? His appearance or his baptism?

John was God's advertisement. Rooted in the nation's past, his appearance in the desert caught the popular imagination. His message prepared the populace for the coming of One Greater. Get Ready!

The contrary sign of John brought together historical significance and prophetic tradition. It also revealed God's activity. God was about to do something new, unique, different. John stood in the shadows of the past, but pointed to future events.

As the year ends, we, too, look back to the past for comfort and reflection. But we look forward to the coming of One Greater. Let us take the time to Get Ready.

Take some time this week to review this year. What were you high and low points? How did your history affect you? Now, look forward to Christmas. How can you entrust you history to the Lord? How can you open yourself to the changes he can make? AMEN