

**THE MESSAGE Advent 2****December 6, 2009****Luke 3:1-6****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller*****Advent Conspiracy: Rebel***

It was Christmas afternoon and nothing was any different. Oh... there had been the presents and the Christmas goodies, but that was all a distant memory. As he walked across the field from the house to his father's business all he could think about was that everyone had missed his birthday.

Turning thirteen was supposed to be great; at least that's what his friends told him. Having your birthday fall on the same day as Christmas was never that great, but no one forgot it before. There were always a couple of "one for twos." You know – the Christmas and birthday present combo.

No one had remembered his birthday. They did remember that it was his turn to take out the trash for the next day's pick-up at his father's business. So that is what he was doing. As he struggled with the industrial-sized containers, his frustration finally boiled over into tears. The sound of the squeaking wheels was especially annoying.

As he turned to grab the second container, he heard a voice. Somebody was yelling from across the field, and it was getting closer. As his ears tune in, it became clear that the voice was yelling for him.

He could hear the running footsteps getting closer. But before he could wipe away the tears from his face, his big brother burst into view, running toward him and calling out to him. From that moment on everything changed. A smile crept across his face as he was caught up in the whirlwind of a new possibility, a new future, a new day.

Every Christmas brings with it the anticipation of something new happening; a new possibility, a new future, a new day. We look forward to it's arrive with anticipation, don't we?

On the other hand, we can so easily get stuck in the rut of the same old, same old: the same Christmas rush, the same Christmas hustle and bustle, the same Christmas angst, the same Christmas worry and frustration, and even participating in the same rituals year after year, long after we've forgotten why we do them in the first place.

It's almost as if we are tempted to forget whose birthday it is, and hum-drum our way through it all. Or some of us get so super vigilant that we treat it like an anvil around our necks, preventing us from really celebrating.

I've always seen Christmas as a time for celebrating. Growing up Christmas Eve was seen as the time for celebrating the truth about the coming of Jesus, on Christmas Eve. Christmas morning was seen as the time for celebrating the myth about the coming

of Santa. And the two together never made sense for me. They still don't. Maybe they're not supposed to?

I tend to perpetuate the Christmas myth too. You perhaps saw our family picture in yesterday's paper. Every year we go for carriage ride with Santa in Lebanon on the first Friday in December. We were the first ones in line and Santa usually rides up front with the driver but this year he was in the Carriage with us. So I figured this is a great time for our children to learn from Santa. So I started asking him some questions like,

"How did you get down here from the north pole?"

He answered, "I came on a plane because there wasn't any snow."

"Oh, that makes sense. Did you wear your red suit or plain cloths?"

"I wore my suit."

"Santa, how do you get those reindeer to fly or is it a secret?"

"It's a secret."

"Santa where do you go for vacation?"

"Cancun," he answered with one word.

I kept the questions coming. Our children just sat there taking it all in. For Santa the ride couldn't end soon enough. As we got off of the carriage, Santa smacked me on the arm practically pushing me off the carriage. My arm still hurts. Yes, I tend to perpetuate the Christmas myth.

Now I'm not trying to bust anybody's bubble about Christmas. That's not my intent. And I certainly don't want to be accused of being a Christmas scrooge. Here is my point; the myth of Christmas keeps us in bondage. The truth of Christmas sets us free from that bondage. And there are many people all around us stuck in the myth of the Christmas bondage.

The truth about the Christmas story includes a voice crying out to us in the wilderness; a voice that declares a new possibility, a new future, a new day. A voice that is calling us to rebel (yes rebel) from the over-processed commercialization of our existence.

Rebellion was not new to the people in Jesus' day. It's not new to us either. The Bible is full of rebellion and prophecy about rebellion. Listen to our reading for this morning from Luke 3:1-6 (*Read Luke 3:1-6*).

John the Baptist was a rebel, and he called people to rebel, to rebel against sin, to rebel against the old life, to repent and return to God, confessing their sins and being baptized as a sign of new life and new possibilities and a new future and a new day.

Luke's use of Isaiah is an intentional reference to the coming Messiah giving us the context for John's rebellious message. Luke tells us about the ruling powers at the time. There are a number of reasons for Luke to do this. Here are just two:

First is to date the story and make it authentic. In Luke's day there were many stories being told about the coming Savior not all of them were credible. Luke is telling the whole world that he has the facts and there is credibility to his story.

Second is a reminder to the reader of who was in power at the time. It's like writing a story today and referencing JFK or Lyndon Johnson. The reader would immediately understand the historical and cultural context. Like the Vietnam War, the protests, the civil rights movement, etc. Luke helps us understand the historical setting. It was a volatile time.

Luke takes the time to point out for us that some of the most brutal and violent leaders were in power in that part of the world at the time. They used their power for violence. The Romans were particularly skilled at killing. Herod and his sons were even more brutal. They created a situation in which rebellion was a constant threat to their position and power.

So it's not surprising that each sect of Judaism rebelled differently at that time. The Pharisees became highly pious and hypocritical. The Sadducees occupied themselves with Temple rightness and become very critical. Many of the Essenes withdrew from society passively. Revolutionary groups, like the Zealots, emerged specifically to take on the Roman Empire through violence.

It's in this setting, this context, that Luke tells us about John coming out of the wilderness, coming from a place of exile, to proclaim the rescue of all the oppressed, abandoned, and alienated. Into this highly charged environment comes a call to a different kind of revolt, a different kind of rebellion.

When Isaiah declares that the hills will be made low and the valleys filled-in, he is using a military image, a King David like savior riding into town. The Old Testament prophecy is going to be fulfilled! Luke proclaims. A new king is coming! The Lord is coming to restore Israel! In the midst of this oppressive and violent power, comes a voice calling from the wilderness.

The expectation is that the oppressive power will be met with a bigger and more violent power. It's like saying, "We have a bigger bomb than you do! And we are not afraid to use it! So go ahead try us..." For Jewish people it was seen as a homecoming, but for the Romans and for Herod's family this was a rebellion of the worse kind. A threat to their power and way of life.

Who of us haven't, at one time or another, felt abandoned, empty, or alone? As if God has abandoned us. For many people this feeling increases dramatically during the Christmas season. Depression runs very high at this time of year!

Each one of us has our own wilderness that we find ourselves in from time to time. Our reaction is to meet violence with violence, gossip with gossip, hate with hate,

shame with shame, sadness with sadness. “I don’t get mad I get even!” becomes the battle cry.

Oh there’s got to be a better way. We fall into playing the “blame game” and we make ourselves the victim. It shatters us, scatters us, harries us, and destroys us. It is so easy for us to become like the Pharisee, or Sadducee, or Essene, or Zealot. But that is not the kind of rebellion I’m referring to...

We all desire a homecoming of sorts. We all desire to be set free from something. It’s from this perspective that I invite you to see the rebel named, Jesus. Jesus did not come to usher in a rebellion of violence. Jesus did not come to bring a rebellion of hatred or sadness. Jesus came to bring a rebellion of love, and truth, and peace, and hope for one and all.

Here is the power of Jesus’ rebellion: God’s love, not violence, wins. God’s hope, not hatred, wins. God’s truth, not myth, wins. God’s righteousness, not rightness, wins. God’s forgiveness and mercy wins. With God and God’s ways in Christ Jesus we are winners every time.

We are brought home through the power of sacrifice. We are made whole through the gift of grace. By grace we become rebels of the best kind. We rebel against a culture of destruction and self-centeredness to live our lives by God’s grace recognizing who we are and whose we are. We are servants of the Lord.

Therefore we intentionally engage in activities that help us live by faith. We gather in God’s grace... We grow in God’s grace... We go to share God’s grace with others...

This is why we live and have our being as rebels in Christ Jesus. We are being called to participate in the Advent Conspiracy following the example of the greatest rebel of all time: Jesus. There is a voice calling to you from the wilderness. Let the rebellion begin. Are you in? Amen