

Rudolph Reindeer, Meet John the Baptist
Luke 3:1-6

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and John the Baptist. They don't really go together, but I'm hoping that long after my words have been forgotten, Rudolph will still be swimming in your ears and you might recall not the most famous reindeer of all, but the point of John the Baptist's proclamation.

Well, our passage begins with a long and to tell the truth, tedious description of when it was John began his ministry. The passage is filled with references to Roman leaders. Let's see, The emperor was Tiberius, Pontius Pilate was in Judea, Herod in Galilee, Philip in, well, somewhere, Lysanias in Abilene, but I don't think that's Texas. Probably around 27 to 29 AD, if we're interested.

But Luke's point is not primarily chronological or historical. . . it is theological. Luke wants to talk about God's acting in history. He sets the scene: Rome seems to have all power. The emperor, who demands to be worshiped as a god, is in complete control. All those governors in the hinterlands speak of Rome's perspective: we are absolutely in control.

And make no mistake about it. These Roman rulers believed the people were nothing but pawns. The rulers, The Romans, they were the ones who count. The others, well, not so much, not very much, not at all. But Luke's gospel tells a different story: it is God who is really in control. And the very people overlooked by the Romans are people who matter very much to God.

Oh, and by the way, Luke implies, if the Romans thought they were all that mattered, so too was there a

religious group that thought THEY were all that mattered. The people who for centuries had called themselves the Chosen People. And as God's chosen people, they were making a determined effort to stand up for their God, and actually an excellent effort it was. They had high priests, Annas and Caiaphas, who maintained worship at the sacred Temple in Jerusalem.

But if the Romans felt that only Romans mattered, so the priests tended to think that only THEIR own people, the Jewish people mattered. In Roman eyes, the Jews were nothing; in Jewish eyes the Romans were nothing to God.

And so here's the context. Roman imperialism. Jewish isolation. Blessings only for the chosen.

But it is in the midst of this context, Luke implies, when all the world thinks Rome is everything, and when the Jewish people are thinking God will work out stuff just for them, Luke tells us that God is working the way God wants to work. And in this context he has sent this rather strange man we call John the Baptist.

And in the wilderness he begins to preach. The wilderness. That's where faith and life and truth all hang in the balance. It's in the wilderness Israel has to be honest with God. It's in the wilderness the Ten Commandments are given. It's to the wilderness that Elijah of the Old Testaments escapes when the King Ahab and Queen Jezebel want him gone. It's into the wilderness Joseph took Mary and Jesus when Herod wanted to destroy them.

And John begins his preaching by quoting another prophet who used the wilderness theme, namely Isaiah. In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. And a poetic image of the world becoming the way God wants

the world to be: paths are straight, deep dangerous valleys are filled, foreboding mountains will be brought low and all that is rough and dangerous and treacherous will be made smooth.

Prepare the way of the Lord. In the Greek, the tense uses denotes urgency. This is important stuff. Most important stuff. God is going to act.

But how? It won't be in a political way, to cast aside Rome. And it won't be in a particular way, just for the Jewish people.

And this is a point worth remembering: John the Baptist is preparing us for a new message, and this new message, from Jesus, will be not about political salvation; it won't involve a nation.

Well, what will it involve? John gives voice to the ministry of the one to come, Jesus. He gives voice to the purpose of Jesus. And here is what he says, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." This new kingdom Jesus proclaims will be about souls. It will be spiritual, not political. And it will not be for the few.

No, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." Hold that phrase, because now we're going to introduce Rudolph once again. And make the song into a sort of parable, if you will.

Rudolph was different. He had a very shiny nose. If you saw it, you would even say it glowed.

Rudolph, in other words, was an outsider. Not one of us. He was a reindeer, but other reindeer didn't care about the content of his character, did not see in Rudolph a brother. All they saw was that shiny red nose. And

included him out of every reindeer game. Every reindeer gathering. Rudolph was an outcast. Not because of what he had done, but because of the accident of his birth.

The Romans wouldn't have liked him because he wasn't one of the elite. He was just a reindeer. And the religious reindeer of Jesus' that time wouldn't have liked him because he wasn't the right kind of reindeer. We don't want shiny nosed reindeer to mess up our games, our gathering, our religious assemblies.

Things were about to change. John announced change, in the wilderness to his people. And Rudolph, forlorn, outcast Rudolph was about to have his life changed as well. Because if John preached about the coming messiah, Jesus, who would have a different perspective, Rudolph had already caught the eye of Santa.

The reindeer gang was exclusive. Only the right kind of reindeer, black-nosed reindeer need apply. They didn't want any other reindeer to come and destroy all their games, for that's what they enjoyed most about their fellowship, all those games.

But the head of the reindeer gang was Santa. And Santa (the word means saint) had different ideas. His vision was that Rudolph should be included. He saw that Rudolph had power and vision and abilities that the reindeer had over-looked, because, well, they were too busy with their own games.

And then one foggy Christmas eve, the games were over. The mission was at hand. And nothing but fog. Everyone was grounded. And Santa, well Santa, looked over at Rudolph, and that attribute that had been their excuse to keep Rudolph away from the herd, now becomes the one attribute that was needed most. And

Rudolph, with his nose so bright, guided the sleigh that night.

Then, well then, all the other reindeer loved him. Shame on them. They should have loved him from the beginning. When he was different. They should have loved him when he was standing all by himself. Instead, they simply played their own little games, night after night, not even noticing that bright red nose light shining forlornly from Rudolph.

And it is Rudolph who will go down in history. Because his master, Santa, saw value in him, when no one else did.

All flesh shall see the salvation of God. How quickly we concentrate on that word, salvation. Yes, we will be saved. How wonderful.

But I think the emphasis should be on “all flesh.” In a time when folks were each claiming divine primacy for themselves, Roman and religious people alike, John was proclaiming a savior who would offer salvation to all flesh, that is to everyone, no matter what the color of their noses, no matter what their background.

All flesh. Salvation not just people who look like us, think like us, act like us. This is the astounding message of Jesus. That’s why Jesus spoke affirmingly about Samaritans, when no one, Jewish or Roman liked them. That’s why Jesus allowed women to touch him, to sit at his feet as disciples. That’s why Jesus healed the servant of a Roman soldier and the daughter of a leader of the Jewish synagogue.

And this is our calling as a church. To say to the lonely, the outcast, the ones who can’t quite seem to fit in:

We love you and we believe you have something to offer to God. We are to see value in those whom others have seen no value.

And we are to say to them, and act towards them like this: we will love you whether you, symbolically speaking, guide the sleigh tonight or even if you crash it on take-off. Or to sort of quote another Christmas song: as a church we are called to love, to welcome, to evangelize, both the naughty and the nice.

This is our calling as a church. No more games. No more business as usual. John commands us: prepare the way for the savior of all flesh, who will offer new life to all people.

Well, good for Rudolph. I'm happy it turned out so well for him.

But still, the other reindeer really should have loved him even before that foggy night, and long before then really should have invited him into their games, and more importantly into their hearts, don't you think?