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HISTORICAL SERIES, 16

The Voice in the Wilderness

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The Rev. Dr. Marlin Aadland was the first Bishop of the British Columbia Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, serving in that ministry from 1986 to 1998. Thereafter he served as pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Vancouver, British Columbia, from 1998 until his retirement in 2005. This sermon was preached in that congregation on the Second Sunday in Advent, 2003.

Text: Luke 3:1-6

In the 52nd year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, when Adrienne Clarkson was Governor General of Canada, Jean Chretien and/or Paul Martin was Prime Minister of Canada, Gordon Campbell was Premier of British Columbia, and Larry Campbell was mayor of Vancouver, and when Raymond Schultz was National Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, and Gerhard Preibisch was Bishop of the British Columbia Synod,¹ the word of the Lord came.

What time is it?

If we were measuring time the way the ancients did, it might sound like the above. There was no BC or AD. Time was measured in terms of the important people of the day, whether they were really important or not. Besides the fact that Luke was a person of his time, why does Luke write this way?

For one thing, he means to say that when the word of God came, it came to *this* world: a world of kings, governors, and emperors. That is to say, the word of God *really* came to *this* world — this world of politics, economics, education, finances, entertainment, etc.

For another, he is masterfully intermixing two ways in which we mark time. Normally the way we mark time is called *chronos*, that is, *chronological time*, time that passes, time that can be dated, given a number, be located in history. Our friends south of the border remember September 11, 2001 — a day of terror. We are terribly time-conscious:

- I'm ten minutes late for my appointment.
- It's only three weeks till Christmas.
- There are only about ten days of school before break.
- There are only 3,000 payments left on my mortgage or car loan.
- We are 10, 30, 50, 70, or 90 years old.

That is time as we figure it, reckon with it, on a daily basis.

Chronos time.

But time has also another dimension, and the Greeks had a word for it, too. *Kairos*. *Kairos* is time loaded with special meaning; eventful time. Time that makes a difference in people's lives. In that sense, 9/11 is also *kairos* time. Let me give you some more examples.

- Remember the first time you saw Santa Claus and were overwhelmed with mystery, awe, and anticipation?
- Remember the time you ran into a door and knocked out your front teeth? Remember the first time you took an airplane ride or skied down a treacherous slope?
- And (to my wife) do you remember the time on a hill overlooking downtown Calgary when we sat together in my 1958 Volkswagen Beetle and I asked you to marry me? Do you remember that time? And I wonder if you were so quick to say Yes because a summer storm was bearing down on us, lightning was flashing, and there was a distinct threat that we could be blown off the hill? "Yes," you said, "now let's get out of here!" Ah, I remember the time!
- And I remember when our children were born and how the doctor said he would call when the child was due — and how, in both cases, he called after the fact.
- I remember my first Christmas away from home and how much I cried.
- I remember when pastors laid their hands on my head and prayed for me as I was set apart for holy ministry.

All of this occurred in the real world — *chronos* — but all events were more than that; they were loaded with meaning that affected my life forever. *Kairos*.

In the middle of time, says Luke — the time in which we all live, clock time — came the word of the Lord, and *chronos* became *kairos*. For when it came, it did not come from Caesar's palace (and I don't mean Las Vegas!), or from the governor's mansion, or from the

temple — all the expected places. It came in the middle of the wilderness. It came from that place and in that place where all agricultural revolutions begin, the desert. It came from a place much like the one when the mountain rocked and roared, and lightning and thunder filled the air, and Yahweh (“I will be who I will be”) addresses his chosen ones, Israel.

Every Israelite girl and boy was told, taught and re-taught the story of the time when they became special. “You, my son, my daughter,” the elders would tell them, “you were there at the crossing of the Red Sea; you were there in the wilderness when we were made children of the Covenant. Do you remember the time?”

Is it possible that in the middle of these times — our busy or not-so-busy 24-hour days — in the face of carefully calculated calendars and synchronized watches, and the “best laid plans of mice and men” — that a word comes out of the wilderness? Surprise! Surprise!

Is it possible that in the middle of all our bigness, brightness, might, success, and pursuits of self-fulfillment, a voice comes to us ... from a place we know not whence? A word coming when all other voices are suddenly stifled? A voice that seems all too frail and insignificant? A voice which declares, “Get ready! It’s time! It’s God’s time! It’s *kairos*! The true sovereign of this world is coming to town — and it isn’t Santa Claus.”

Set your faces toward this voice. It is an alternative voice. A subversive, undermining voice, unlike any voice you’ve ever heard! Listen to this voice. Get ready! Watch! Look this way!

It seems so futile, doesn’t it? How can this voice compete with 500 amp speakers and 60-inch screens? Furthermore, does the world really need the Christian faith? Hasn’t it demonstrated that it can do quite nicely without it?

Professor James Kay says:

The principalities and powers we have served have grown tired of us — we’re an embarrassment. We can hear these words, words we’ve heard before, time and time again: ‘repentance, baptism, forgiveness of sins.’ We’ve heard them all before, and so we never really hear them until they come to us in our “worlderness,” in the middle of our civilized hopes and plans. Divested of our power, stripped of our rank, no longer running and keeping time, maybe God will finally get through to us in the wilderness, as in the days of Tiberius Caesar. Now that would be an Advent! To discover at the end of the age that God is readying prime time for us, to find us as we’re about to go under, panting after dying

gods. If the living God is not a liar, if God is faithful to the promise that “all flesh shall see salvation,” then our time, too, is in God’s hands, however we reckon it.²

One day this word to which John the Baptist points is nailed to a cross. But this act brings healing to all who have ears to hear.

If you have nowhere else to go, run to the wilderness and hear the voice that calls us to life — for time and eternity.

Listen! For Christ’s sake — for your sake — for the world’s sake — listen and live. Your Saviour is at the door.

Peace be with you all.

Notes

- ¹ Interestingly enough, the Rev. Raymond L. Schultz succeeded Bishop Aadland in 1998, and was himself succeeded by the Rev. Gerhard Preibisch in 2001, the year Bishop Schultz was elected National Bishop.
- ² *Christian Century*, November 19, 1997: 1067.