

“Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. Jesus began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. Upon coming to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was customary. Jesus stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of God is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to those who cannot see, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then Jesus began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”’”

This is Luke’s second stab at beginning his Gospel, most scholars say about these first six verses of chapter three. He’d already started once with trying to draw up “an orderly account,” his first few verses say from all the “eyewitnesses” he’d already tried: ‘to tell the whole story from the beginning,’ as chapter one says. “In the days of King of Herod of Judea” those words were the prelude to the birth narratives of John and Jesus. There really wasn’t any need to date everything again. It’s like Luke’s going along, and all of a sudden he realizes focusing on a sweet baby in a manger with angels singing about peace on earth and good will amongst all really begs the question about *how*, how to have that kind of peace and how to live in that kind of harmony. And so Luke begins again, with the preaching of John the Baptist, perhaps realizing that John wasn’t simply the precursor to Jesus, as those first opening words might suggest, the one in the back wings preparing someone else’s Broadway debut. John is really key to our understanding what Jesus and the Gospel are all about. Only Luke has two beginnings to his Gospel, and only Luke is the one quoting the full prophecy from Isaiah’s fortieth chapter, Matthew and Mark talk about John baptizing in the River Jordan and they quote verse 3 of that famous passage that begins “Comfort, comfort now my people...” they include: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of God; make the pathways straight,’ but only Luke recalls the rest of the passage, the promise of verses 4 and 5. “Every valley shall be filled in, and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The crooked places shall be made even and the rough ways smoothed out and all flesh (this is the heart of the promise, the good news) all flesh shall see the glory of God.” That is the point of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ and Luke wanted to make sure that message and its power and frankly its imposition on our lives, didn’t get lost in scenes of cattle lowing and shepherds watching stars instead of sheep.

“All flesh shall see the glory of God.” That’s the part of the promise Baruch, Jordan’s secretary as Rev. Edgard told us on Leather Sunday, Baruch remembers as he writes to the poor left behind in the Babylonian exile. To people who’d been separated from their children, and in many ways their hope for the future to people who’d seen their leaders carted off to imprisonment or perhaps worse. As we saw that’s the news just released

about five gay men in Iraq a month and 1 day ago (11/09/06). Five underground leaders of the group, Iraqi LGBT, planning a January meeting with the UN High Commission for Human Rights, Iraqi LGBT, the group documenting the summary executions of gay men, sometimes boys as young as 15, girls as young as 9, for sexual non-conformity. Amjad and Ali, Ayman, Rafid and Hassan, all between the ages of 19 and 29, brave beyond their years, were carried off in a police raid, the kind of practice instigated by the very “leader” of that nation our President saw fit to call to the White House for a meeting this week (Abdule Aziz al-Hakim, President of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq), the very man who brought death squads to Iraq. Maybe Luke started over because he thought it was really important for us to make the connections between what is happening in our world and the reign God longed to usher in with the birth of Christ. Maybe he realized, more important than simply dating the births was situating the messages of the Gospel in its concrete political and social and religious context, Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, Caiaphas, those names were synonymous with violence and blood shed and persecution and oppression, as is that of Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the man invited to the White House this week. Names synonymous with all the things blatantly and defiantly working against peace on earth and good will amongst all. Names like that of Brother Tobi of the Friends of Israel Church in El Salvador telling parents to, quote “throw your gay children out; otherwise God will cause you misery.” Instructing people not to report bashing because, he says, this is “God working against gay people.” Just a few days ago in that country, four trans youth were brutally attacked, eighteen “peace officers” beat them. It’s not unusual, we’re told and many well-placed “names” make the proclamation of good will more myth than mandate.

Luke wanted to make sure no one missed the message, the divine call embodied in the innocence of a child born in a manger “rude and bare,” as the hymn says. He wanted to make sure we understand the point of the vulnerability of what it means to be totally dependent on love, on someone loving you, to survive.

The mystics say, we can only really know the love of God when we are stripped of all our illusions about both our own goodness and our own shortcomings. Only in the place of total vulnerability, of total exposure, can we know what love is, or the power its presence can call forth in us.

Jesus is not only the object of faith and of adoration in Luke’s Gospel, which we could easily leave those first two opening chapters believing, “just me and my Jesus,” people sometimes say; a personal relationship is all I need, as if our relationship with Christ is a draw-down account. Jesus is not only the object of faith in Luke, he is the example, the model of faith, of what it means to live fully. The example of what it means to struggle to be totally dependent on love in this world, totally open before the God who is love, about everything that’s going on in us, what we need and what we want, placing that in front of love-incarnate.

What is going on in us, in our city, when 41 shots can be pumped into 30 men on their way to a wedding? What do we need, what do we want, what are we placing in total vulnerability before love, when we try to lie about what happened? Are we afraid? What

needs to happen to usher in the promised reign of peace on earth, good will amongst all? Will demonstrating in the streets as 500 or so people did last Friday, and as I hope all of us will do next Saturday, will that make the rough places between the races, between PAD? And some New York City police officers smooth, even? What is it we really want? That's not a question for black people only, it's a question for all of us.

"No justice, no peace," was Jeremiah's (Baruch's mentor's) cry (Jeremiah 14). Do we want justice or do we want revenge. Some people want revenge and who can blame them? Iraqis are lining up by the hundreds, they say, to be the one who throws the lever to release the gallows that will hang Saddam Hussein, people who want revenge for the deaths of their loved ones. Nichole Paultre Bell, Sean Bell's widow, says she just wants justice, that's all. But what is justice, when 132 shots are pumped into a 92-year-old woman in her own Atlanta home (Kathryn Johnston 11/21/06) and all anyone can say is, it was a mistake, it was the wrong address. If you don't think that has anything to do with you, think about this. Nine weeks of investigating the sexual abuse of young boys serving as House pages brought only the admission of "negligence" in protecting children, but no one broke the law, we are told, so no one will be held accountable. Someone did break the law in El Salvador. Forty-five gay and bisexual men have been murdered in El Salvador in the last eight years, that we know of, but no one will be held accountable. The law was broken, but nothing has been done. The Chinese government broke into the offices of the AIDS Project in Beijing and arrested AIDS activist Wan Yanhai for advocating condom use in a nation with a 27% rate of increase infections last year, but other nations say nothing.

"What do we want?" That was our cry from the streets in days past. Are we even willing, here this day, to talk about what's really going on in our world and what that has to do with the Gospel of Jesus the Christ? Do we really *want* the rough places smoothed out? You want Jesus, says R. Rohr, SJ, you have to go through John. That was Luke's sudden revelation. It's not enough to hail as the "Prince of Peace," it's not enough to cast all our cares on him, and then smile, because "*Jesus love us, yes he does!*" We have to become what we *want*, we have to give this world what we are seeking from it. That was John's brilliance; his insightful view of the ways of Christ.

Every valley of disparity and gaping separation filled in and every mountain of division being made low is about us, the promise rests on (human?) life, not the current or prevailing (pd?) system, us being willing to do simple things like sign letters like the one in your bulleting this morning. It's about us being willing to "shop for justice" as the Rev. Sharpton put it, on 5th Avenue next Saturday. The point of the exiles coming home in that first lesson was not simply that the once cut-off now became the once-again included, the restored. The point is that they *take off* the garment of affliction and put on the robes of righteousness, of spiritual joy, of "right relationship," the word means. They put on "the glory of God" ~ meaning they / in their lives, demonstrate the splendor, the radical good news of God's presence. The point of Baruch's vision is that the transformed become the transforming.

William Hernandez organizing “Entre Amigos,” the queer rights organization in El Salvador, when the politicians refused to take the report about the four trans youth beat up, he simply went to the national prosecutor’s office. He leveled the playing field.

The Commission on Jewish Law and Standards in the Conservative Movement approved the option for seminaries to train openly queer rabbinical and cantorial students this week, and the option for congregation to bless unions, and the option to do what we like in bed (with the exception of one little thing which I won’t mention but which they say the Torah absolutely forbids, oh well, two out of three!).

Mountains are falling all over the globe in terms of recognizing in our lives and our love. South Africa, the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Spain, Israel, Massachusetts, California, Vermont, Connecticut, soon New Jersey, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, France, Germany, Portugal, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Taiwan is teetering, Mexico City, Great Britain, Ireland is considering, Aruba, all have granted in some case and some way, some form of relational recognition to our people. Every mountain, every gaping valley filled in, that’s the promise. Our world is on the verge of the greatest landslide in history and much of it, at the hands of queer people.

The point is the day of salvation is now, the time of reversal of fortune is now, the sorrowing are to find their joy thru our witness now. The downtrodden and shamed through our live are to be exalted now. Those cut-off by mountains of discrimination or just simple indifference are to be brought to level ground now by us.

And, I think I’m seeing just that in many, many place. There’s a lot of crud going on, AND there are a lot of heretofore insurmountable mountains being brought down and valleys being filled in. People of every color, race and creed are coming together in this city, slowly perhaps but surely, to say enough is enough. “What we have is a spirit of unity being born in this city,” said one civil rights leader (Rev. Al Sharpton). That’s what was born in a manger two thousand years ago. The Bloods and the Crips, laid down their long term animosity to stand together on something really worth fighting for. Alli Hilli will go on fighting and organizing for the sale of queer people in Iraq, despite the personal fatwa against him, just his solitary act of courage levels mountains of fear and hatred and brutality. For me, it totally diminishes their power, as Jesus will allude to in another passage.

You know, we’ve talked for many, many years in this place about “the Bible and homosexuality” and how the scriptures do not condemn us. And from time to time there have been people who’ve said to me, “Well, thanks, I got my life back because of what you taught me, but now I don’t need a gay church anymore. I’m comfortable with myself, I can fit in almost anywhere.” Well, number one, *Hello!? Anyone home?* This is not a gay church. This is a church that minces no words when it comes to queerness or God’s love for queer people or our right to be treated as equal children of God. This is a church based on the teachings of the Gospel and doing its darnedest to practice those teaching in the world around us, and refusing to leave queer people out of the mix, because as all of us learned a long time ago “Silence = Death.” This is a church, not a gay church or a

straight church, but a church. And, if you are so healed, so whole, then the next step spiritually is to become a healer, become a promoter of wholeness, put on the glory of God which means all flesh seeing the salvation of God. That's what gives God glory. You don't get well to blend in, you get well to stand on the mountain tops and guide other exiles home. Baruch was saying, find your place in history. John cries, don't try to escape it, while visions of sugar plums dance in your heads. The time is ripe for the promise of God to live through us!

Maybe you think, "Great! But I'm not going to the Sudan for God anytime soon and I don't know how to stop the conflict there, much less help people get safe access to fresh water." Maybe so, but read all of Luke's third chapter. When crowds line up around him and ask, "What shall we do?" in response to his proclamation, a passage we'll study in more depth next week, he *does not* say, "learn to leap tall buildings in a single bound." He doesn't suggest anything extraordinary or unusual. Give some of your food to the hungry, he say, share some of our coats and don't extort and rip people off. He calls us to "live the usual, unusually well," says Sr. Diane Bergant. Maybe buying our bottled water at Starbucks, who promises to give a percentage of the sales to make sure children around the globe have safe access to clean water, is an ordinary thing, we could all commit to doing extraordinarily well this Advent season. Maybe we're not going to travel to South Africa and work with people who sit on police review commissions or high placed government officials. We already are. I know this. I know this place is filled with good people who really want the violence, the racial disparities, the hatred, the wars and all the stuff we see on the news every single day to stop. I already know and trust what's in our hearts. We are people of good will, who really want peace on earth. Now we just have to give what we want to receive, that's the message of the Gospel: God so loved the world that God gave, hoping that would lead to all flesh seeing the salvation of God together.

I believe that day can come and so did John the Baptist. He wouldn't have preached a baptism of repentance if he didn't. You see, in his head, repentance wasn't about trying to earn the love or forgiveness of God. Things worked the other way around: Repent, changing, was about realizing how much God loves us to begin with, and then responding to that Good News with new life. Luke harbors no illusions about human goodness or frailty, nor about what can change in and through us when we stand vulnerable before the Love of God alone.

If we, as queer people of faith, people here at MCCNY really have come to terms with how deeply and irrevocably God loves each and everyone of us, then it's time it's really time, to take the next step spiritually, which is not fitting in with all the places and portals of past oppression, but moving forward with the kinds of day-in and day-out choices and actions that will spread the joy and share the glory that shines in those who already know what it means to be the beloved child of God. It's time to show our splendor as God's redeemed, absolutely everywhere.