

The salvation of God

Malachi 3:1-4, The Song of Zechariah (*Luke 1: 68-79*), Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6

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Three weeks ago I was in Washington DC. I was privileged to be there over the course of a Sunday so that I could attend services at the National Cathedral. The Cathedral is in a spectacular setting, and is itself spectacular, a huge Gothic structure. It is truly majestic.

The Gospel for that Sunday was Mark 13.1-8. You perhaps remember that this Gospel begins Jesus' words on "the end". The Gospel starts off with Jesus coming out of the Temple in Jerusalem. His disciples comment, probably on the Temple itself: "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!", to which Jesus responds "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

As the vast crowd of worshippers stood there in the Cathedral, listening to the Gospel, we looked around at the beautiful building around us. Not surprisingly, the same thing must have been on the mind of the preacher, the Dean of the Cathedral, who began his [sermon](#), in his gentle southern accent with the comment: "I have to say, this text makes me nervous." All in the congregation laughed, because of course this was the first thing on our minds as we had looked around at the "large stones" and "large buildings" of the Cathedral.

But, today we hear of something even more radical: a prophecy not just of the Temple in Jerusalem falling but of the mountains falling. John the Baptist cries out: "*a voice bellowing in the wilderness, (saying) 'Prepare ye the Lord's way. Make his paths straight. ... every mountain and every high place is going to be brought down.'*"

Yet, John was not describing a physical transformation of the land. Oh, there was going to be a new land, and it was going to come about through an earthquake, but this earth-shaking drama was not going to happen through a physical shaking of the world. John was talking about the very same thing that Jesus would talk about when he pointed to the Temple and said: See that great building? It's coming down. Every rock.

But, while you and I may know that, we still might ask ourselves the question: why? Why did it all have to come down? For the same reason that all religious institutions or governments or regimes that set themselves against God will be brought down. Because God's plan for this, His world is that the Kingdom of God should arise here. And that Kingdom is a Kingdom of righteousness and goodness as opposed to pride and evil in the service of power, of peace and life-giving as opposed to war-making and life-taking. And John and Jesus saw that what the priests and lawyers of Jerusalem had done had nothing to do with the Kingdom of God but only

with creating for themselves their own kingdom. And so here comes the voice of John, followed by the voice of Jesus: you have made yourselves mountains, and you will be brought down.

But not just you, leaders of Israel. Do you remember how the Gospel reading starts? To set the stage for the coming earthquake, Luke doesn't just point to the religious establishment in Israel but also to the larger political order around. He starts the Gospel by pointing to 7 key, historical figures, the major points on the landscape of the drama that is take place. For Luke to mention them would be like someone today who wanted to set the stage for a story set in Ottawa who would probably mention the Governor General, Prime Minister, Premier of Ontario, mayor of Ottawa, and the heads of the major churches in Ottawa.

Note who these important people are for Luke at the time when John and Jesus began their ministry:

- The Roman Emperor Tiberius, Augustus Caesar's own step-son, a great military leader who became the commander in chief of the most powerful army on the face of the earth in that day.
- Then Luke names the one under whose authority the Roman army governed the occupied land of Israel, a petty magistrate from Italy named Pontius Pilate. But, though he was petty, Pilate ruled as if he were all that mattered in Israel and as if his were the only power in the world.
- Then Luke names two of the sons of King Herod who was called the Great and even "King of the Jews", both of whom governed particular regions for the sake of the Roman occupying force. One of those sons, who was also called Herod, governed the region of Galilee, while the other, Philip, governed the area that we know today as the Golan Heights. Jesus would walk the Roman roads of Galilee under the watchful eye of the troops and police that were under the authority of Herod and Philip. It was also Herod who took Philip's wife, married her, and when he was denounced by John the Baptist for doing so, yielded to his wife's calls to have John killed when his wife's teenager daughter seduced him and made him do whatever she wanted.
- Then Luke names a person that you've probably never heard: Lysanias. He ruled the area of what we now call Lebanon. It's not surprising that you haven't heard of him. After all, how long do governors survive in Lebanon? Poor Lebanon. It always seems to be under someone else's authority. In the day of Lysanias, it was under Roman authority, just as the land of Israel was. Lysanias was governor for Rome of that part of Lebanon that Jesus went to on one of the few times that he ventured beyond the land of Israel and encountered non-Jews, foreigners, the Gentiles, in other words, people like you and me.
- Finally, Luke mentions the highest ranking officials in Jerusalem, those under whose power Jesus was handed over to the Romans to be executed. There, in the shadow of the great and beautiful Temple, Jesus, the Messiah, God's own beloved son, was handed over

to the Romans by Caiaphas, the High Priest, and his father-in-law, Annas, a powerful figure who ruled from the shadows.

I think that you would agree, that Luke names here 7 pretty high peaks in the mountain range of his day, right? The emperor, his governors, the main religious leaders of the Holy Land?

And, what happened to them? Exactly what John prophesied in today's Gospel, and Jesus confirmed: they were brought down. And while John and Jesus knew that this was GOING to happen, Luke knew that it DID happen.

- Luke knew that the Emperor, the most powerful man on earth, Tiberius Caesar, died a broken man just 7 years later after these events began. [Around the ides of March, AD 37.]
- Luke knew that Pontius Pilate, after presiding at the trial of Jesus, was sent back to Rome in disgrace one year before the death of Tiberius [AD 36] and that he probably died shortly after Tiberius, in disgrace.
- Luke knew that the Herod who was governor of Galilee was exiled to France and died 9 years after the events here began, and thus that he lived less than 10 years in the company of the wife that he stole from his brother and who brought him so much grief.
- Luke knew that Lysanias, the governor of Lebanon, and Philip died shortly after Jesus had been executed. And he knew that Lysanias died a forgotten man, while, Philip, a good ruler, died in disgrace.
- Finally, Luke knew that Caiaphas, who was unceremoniously deposed 3 years after presiding over the trial of Jesus, died a short time later.

In other words, Luke knew that within 10 years of the beginning of John's and Jesus' ministry, 6 of these 7 mighty leaders, these mighty mountains, were swept away from history. And not just Luke knew it: most people who were alive within 10 years of John and Jesus ALSO knew it.

And they also knew that these mountains crumbled in disgrace, in dishonour, or into oblivion. In fact, we probably wouldn't even remember even remember the names of Herod, or Lysanias, or Caiaphas, and maybe not even Tiberius, were it not for the fact that they were among the first mountains to fall in the earthquake named Jesus!

But, note: I said that only 6 of the 7 were carried away in the earthquake that happened. But, there was one who wasn't. There was only one figure who wasn't brought down, the last one mentioned by Luke: Annas, the father of the whole family of High Priests who governed until the Temple was brought down. But, as my wife, Rachel, has noted: the fate of Annas who outlived everyone was worse than that of those who died. Because, living to a ripe old age, he was able to see the whole thing come crashing down around him.

- He lived to see the line of priests descended from him get worse and worse, like the sons of Eli.
- He lived to see their corruption and power-seeking and willingness to take life become so grievous that finally he watched as the Temple of Jerusalem, in which he, his sons, his grandsons, and his great-grandsons had presided, burned to the ground, with every rock of its making pulled to the ground.
- Annas watched as the world around him collapsed.

But, what made it worse for Annas, was that he also watched as the valleys were raised up. Because you see the other part of John's prophecy in today's Gospel is not just that mountains will be brought down but that valleys will be raised up:

"a voice bellowing in the wilderness, (saying) 'Prepare ye the Lord's way. Make his paths straight. Every valley is going to be filled up, and every mountain and every high place is going to be brought down. Difficult walkways will be made easy, and rugged ones will become flat. Everyone will witness the deliverance that comes from God.'"

The prophecy is that as the mountains collapse, the valleys will be raised up. The result? The whole land will become a flat and fertile plain.

But again, this is not a physical earthquake. This is even more radical than an earthquake that changes the look of a particular geographic region. This "earthquake" was going to shake the whole world. For what Annas, like Luke, saw was not only that the mountains were brought down, that is, that the "greats" of the day crumbled, but also that the valleys would rise up, that is, as men and women would begin to hear the Gospel of Jesus, they would be transformed. They watched -- Luke to his delight, and Annas to his horror -- and that was exactly what happened: illiterate farmers and fishermen, veiled women and slaves in chains, prostitutes and tax collecting collaborationists, lepers and those whose diseases were invisible.. in other words, all those who had been pushed off the face of the earth into deep, dark valleys where they could be disposed of and forgotten... were given the ability to speak and to teach beyond what any rabbi had known, and were given wisdom that rivaled even that of Solomon.

Annas and Luke both watched as the Kingdom of God began to grow in that fertile plane that was created all across the world. Luke rejoiced to see it happen, for example as he walked the streets of places like Philippi with his friend Paul and watched as men and women whom the world would have forgotten turned to Jesus and were transformed into sons and daughters of the King Himself. But, Annas? Annas tore his garments and wept knowing that all was lost to him and his kind. And they both knew, Luke and Annas, that what was happening was happening because of Jesus, who had been raised up by God from the deepest valley of all, the valley of shameful death.

My friends, what is the message of this Gospel for today? I think that, it couldn't be clearer.

To those who set themselves up as the mighty, who say in their hearts: I am powerful; I will do what I want, I do not care what God wants, or what the Kingdom of God is about, much less about the little people in the Kingdom that our Lord Jesus has inaugurated, the Gospel says this: You will be refined like fire, especially those of you who use the name of God to become powerful in your pride. If, when you are refined, you are found wanting and do not repent of the evil you have done, and are not willing to take down the world that you have built around you in unrighteousness, in power-seeking, in life-taking, then you will be brought down. It will happen sooner or later. But it will happen. Herald, sound the note of judgment for these!

But, to those who are down in the valleys, who feel that you will never make it up the steep hills into which you were pushed or into which you have led yourself in the error of your ways, who feel that hope is nowhere to be found, the Gospel also says this: Take heart, not in yourselves or your own power, but in the care of a loving God to send a Saviour at just the right time. For He comes not only to deliver you from sin and slavery, but to set your feet on a fertile plain and to make you fruitful, as well as all the land around you, if only you will listen to His voice. And know this, you little ones, in that new fertile land that this Saviour, God's own Son, has created, He will also give you homes that shall never move, even though more mountains around you come tumbling down. For if God is your strength, your tower, you shall never be moved.

So, prepare the way of the Lord, for though He did come as He promised, He is coming again, just as He will always come... so that all flesh can see the salvation of God.