

FORCES IN THE DESERT

Text on Advent 2

Sunday, December 6, 2009

Luke 3: 1-6

Luke would have loved the movies. Can't you see the storyboard for Chapter 3?: "1. Long shot of Milky Way galaxy tracking in fast on Planet Earth. 2. With voice over: *In the fifteenth year of the Roman emperor Tiberius . . . etc.* as camera zooms down over the Mediterranean, tracking fast down onto Palestine, now on Judea, now on Galilee, now on desert. 3. DFX mix to crane shot over John at river's edge to fast zoom closeup to prophet's face 4. Fade out voice over; fade in loud on Word of God coming to John in wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight!" Cut! Print! Rushes tonight!

Now, Luke has John quoting from Isaiah 40. "Every valley shall be filled, every mountain made low . . ." Have you got this picture? The digital effects here are unbelievable. Everything that makes land beautiful—the high mountains and river valleys—are being leveled into one vast flatness. Why? What I am going to tell you now they should have taught you in Sunday School.

This Bulldozer from Beyond is blasting and filling so that the armies of King Cyrus of Persia can sweep down and destroy Babylon, which has been holding Jews in exile, for these fifty years. Yes, it's history. The prophet had been reading the papers. He knew that Cyrus was on the march. It was the fall of 539 BCE* and the ancient prophet saw Cyrus as a tool in the hand of his God. Isaiah 40 is a prayer that Cyrus' shocking, awesome forces blast fast through the desert, so that the exiles might go home. That would be salvation. *All flesh shall see the salvation of our God!* sang the prophet. This kind of concrete war-winning is what he meant—rescue by armed forces in the desert from bad rulers.

Now today, no one thinks like this anymore, right? Imagine supposing that salvation—safety, homeland security—was to be had by means of bloody war between forces in the desert. How primitive. Already John the Baptist was taking the ancient words of his Bible and turning the sound of the sword into a plowshare: salvation he interpreted not as homeland security—God knows, the Jews of John's day had no such security; Rome ruled them—but salvation first as a work within oneself, a practice of peace that begins personally, in a transformation of your mind. *This is the way of the Lord*, he declared in the desert. Prepare this way for the Lord—that *all* flesh, not just armored flesh, may see the salvation of our God.

At a time when the disciples are working so hard they haven't had time to eat, Jesus says to them "Come away with me by yourselves to a desert place and rest awhile." (Mark 6.31) To a desert place, a still place, where forces work whose power is life, forces of utterly incomparable kind to those that make death in the desert. Were these latter prophets fools—this John and this Jesus, just dreamers?—to trust that God has forces in the desert able to overturn all fear?

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* Ancient clay tablets identified as *The Babylonian Chronicle* inscribe this news for what was October 13, 539, BCE "[Our god] Marduk is so infuriated by [our Emperor] Nabonidus that Marduk has called upon Cyrus to bring down the state."