

Second Sunday of Advent – Joe Culumber

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-6

Philippians 1:3-11

The Gospel text from Luke 3 serves to remind us that the Christian faith is anchored firmly and undeniably in history. We are tempted to jump over both the first part of Luke 3 and the last section of the chapter.

The first six verses are these seemingly boring and inconsequential statements about when and where someone was emperor and governor in a remote province in the backwaters of the Roman Empire. And the concluding section of the chapter also evokes an uninterested yawn from most readers: who cares that Joseph was the son of Heli, or 19 generations removed from Zerubbabel?

But you see, that is just the point: Jesus the Messiah was a real person who lived at a real address and in real time. The gospel cannot be reduced to just another religious myth or philosophy or some virtual reality. The names, dates, and places are the story:

Names like: – Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas, and John the son of Zechariah.

Places like: – Judea, Galilee, Iturea and Traconitis, Abilene, the desert around the Jordan River.

Time references: – the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.

As Paul affirms, at precisely the right intersection of history, “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law...” – Gal. 4:4

Students are loathe to take an OT survey course because there are so many historical facts related to names, places, and dates that have to be learned to make the story intelligible. Yet the biblical drama of God’s redemptive acts in history is inescapably intertwined with places like the Reed Sea, Mt. Sinai, the Jordan River, Jericho, Megiddo and Babylon; names like Elijah, Rahab, Sennacherib, Jezebel, and Nebuchadnezzar; and dates like 721 and 586 BC and “the year that king Uzziah died” (Isa. 6:1).

And so, completely in character with the OT schema, Luke begins by locating the Jesus story in the “15th year of Tiberius Caesar, in Galilee and the desert around the Jordan River.”

The Gospel is like the script of a superb **3-act play**:

The setting: The birth of Jesus (as Luke has just “located” Jesus)

Act 1: Baptism/anointing >mission, temptation in the Wilderness

Act 2: public ministry: Satan/Rome Jewish power structure/disease, etc.

Act 3: trial, death, & Resurrection.

Luke 3 introduces us immediately to a reality that is named only later in the epistles: the **“principalities & powers”** with which Jesus will be in conflict for the duration of his time on earth. Note the “power” language in the Luke’s description: **“reign – emperor – governor – ruler – high priest.”**

Thus, the second function of this text in Luke 3 is to set the stage not only historically but **theologically** for the drama that is about to unfold. Of course this kind of confrontation with the “principalities & powers” erupts again in full furor in the arrest & trial of Jesus. Consider this exchange between Jesus and Pilate (John 19):

“Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don’t you realize I have **power** either to free you or to crucify you?” Jesus answered, “You would have no **power** over me if it were not given to you from above.”

“Here is your **king**,” Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!” “Shall I crucify your **king**?” Pilate asked. “We have no **king** but **Caesar**,” the **chief priests** answered.

The language of power pervades the New Testament:

- Principalities
- Rule/rulers
- Authority/authorities
- Thrones/ Kings/kingdoms
- Angels/dominions/names
- Elemental spirits (Greek: stoichea)

A working definition of the **“principalities & powers”** would sound like this: the physical, social, psychic and spiritual forces which seek to control our lives and determine our destiny.”

Nietzsche observed: “Wherever I found a living creature, I found the unconditioned will to **power**, to **overpower**.” His observation was confirmed by Bertrand Russell who said: “Of the infinite desires of man, the chief are the desires for **power** and for glory.”

We are surrounded with the language of “power” wherever we look:

Popular culture: power wardrobes, power lunches, power dating, and power rangers.

Sports: power plays in hockey; power forwards in basketball; power runners in football; power hitters in baseball, and Power drinks on the sidelines.

Religion: power evangelism, power encounters, and the demand for signs and wonders. Power lifting demonstrations & ripping phone books apart warm up crowds for evangelistic presentations!

This week at the college we found ourselves debating whether we “transform,” “educate,” or “**empower**” students! Friday afternoon I was waiting at the prison here in Greenville to turn in some paper work in behalf of our Chorale, who will be presenting a Christmas concert there this coming Friday. As I sat there in the lobby, I couldn’t help but notice the “mission statement” emblazoned over the entrance: “FCI Greenville is a safe, pleasant, and **empowered** workplace.”

In terms of their characteristics, the “powers” are multi-faceted (Walter Wink, Naming the Powers): they are heavenly & earthly; divine & human; spiritual & political; invisible and structural; and good & evil. (My own working hypothesis based on 40 years of working in both secular and religious context: all structures, bureaucracies, and hierarchies inevitably tend to the demonic).

What should be our response to the “principalities & powers?”

1. Recognize their existence. Anglican bishop N. T. Wright notes: “If the mainstream post-Enlightenment worldview is correct, all such language is evidence of religious neurosis” (Jesus and the Victory of God, 457).

His assessment is corroborated by Walter Wink: the principalities and powers have largely been neglected since the Enlightenment precisely because of their **spiritual** nature, which means they cannot be made to fit our modern reductionist categories.

Our first response to the “powers” should be to recognize their existence.

Our further response brings us to Paul’s text in Philippians 1. Writing from prison himself, captive apparently to the Roman powers, he is fully confident of Christ’s victory over the principalities & powers! Listen to Paul’s language here: “thanksgiving – joy – confidence – grace – love – righteousness – glory – and praise.” Paul makes three important statements about the “powers.”

2. Affirmed they were created by Christ “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things **in heaven and on earth, visible**

and invisible, whether **thrones or powers or rulers or authorities**; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” – Col. 1:15-17

3. Acknowledged they were disarmed by Christ on the Cross “He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having **disarmed the powers and authorities**, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” – Col. 2:13-15

4. Celebrated Christ’s victory over them in the Resurrection “his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all **rule and authority, power and dominion**, and **every title** that can be given” – Eph. 1:19-21. Yes, “above every title” – even titles like “emperor, governor, ruler” and “high priest.”

5. Stand against the principalities & powers (note the repetition of the word “against”): “For our struggle is not **against** flesh and blood, but **against** the rulers, **against** the authorities, **against** the powers of this dark world and **against** the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. – Eph. 6:12

6. Prepare ourselves for cleansing and refinement (the Malachi text): “the Lord **whom you seek . . . in whom you delight**– is coming, he will sit as a **refiner and purifier** of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver” – Mal.3:1-4

We can prepare for his coming during Advent by **shedding any attachment to or control by the powers of this age**. Again, it is N.T. Wright, who sums up the gospel response to the “powers:”

Jesus denounced those who “compromised with Caesar by playing his power-games . . . by thinking to defeat him with his own weapons.” Instead, he declared that “the way to the kingdom was the way of peace, the way of love, the way of the cross” (Jesus and the Victory of God). Amen.