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Luke 3:1-6
Advent II C
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News Flash! I realize that this is no longer news, but it is still a shock to me. My Father has become a Texan, has been for two months. He now lives a great deal of the time in Plano, Texas, and soon, at least for tax purposes, his license plates will say "TEXAS" instead of "Oklahoma: Native America." I know that this probably grieves many of you, as it does me. In the days to come, you may feel bewildered and betrayed. To have such Texas two step connections, even two steps removed, is a bit much to handle, not to mention what often appears in the media and politics as being Texan. There is swagger, bravado, voluminous hair, excessive use of leather based clothing, and rather rotund, large hats, not to mention the likes of J.R. Ewing. And although one could argue that these descriptions are Texas sized exaggerations, I must say that those stereotypes are all true. Texas, aside from Austin, really is that bad. And for me, this move is especially egregious. After all, my family consists of Oklahomans. And Texas and Oklahoma are two states that thrive on rivalries between each another. There are competitions of oil production, the number of inmates on death row, a rivalry of which state is the flattest, and of course, most importantly, a rivalry of football: OU/Texas weekend being THE holiday of that area.

In fact, Texas, has become a vortex of my entire family: cousins, my sister, and now my Father. A few years ago, after one of my cousins settled with her husband in Dallas I asked my cousin's husband, "Why, why Dallas? Why Texas?" They had been in New Mexico, a lovely state. And her husband responded by saying that he loves cities, being around people and creative energy. I looked at him squarely in the face and said, "A love of cities, a love of culture, and wanting to be around creative energy. All that I can respect, admire, and appreciate. But Dallas.... Texas.... Unforgivable". It is a sad red state of affairs.

Part of the problem, I believe, can be found in Texas pride, though I will acknowledge that I am grumbling out of Oklahoma arrogance. Texas' ad campaign for years demonstrated this overly, overtly proud nature. The ads read, "Texas, like a whole other country," which implied that it was unique not only for its size, but for its unique personality and heritage. However, I must say that even as an Oklahoman and a New Yorker, I must begrudgingly concede some superiority of Texas. Despite my rivalry, I must accept that Texas does have a claim to fame that no other state in the Union has. Texas can fly its state flag at the same height as the American Flag, unlike any other state flag in the union. This is because Texas was at one point a sovereign nation, and as a sign of respect to that fallen nation, its flag may be flown at the same level as the American one. At the Texas state capitol building in Austin, that is how the flags are flown.

Which brings me to why the relationship of Texas' flag to the American flag is relevant. "My point, and I do have one..." is that this flag relationship bears much resemblance to the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. Just like the Texas flag and the American flag can be flown at the same height, in icons and art, John the Baptist is often shown at exactly the same height as Jesus. He is the only figure in the Bible for whom that can be said. Some, like

Mary and Joseph, hover over Jesus. Many look up to Jesus in renderings, but only John can look Jesus squarely in the eye. And that Texas like quality is a good introduction for us to John the Baptist, who is the focus of our Gospel reading today.

Jesus and John the Baptist are set up to be similar characters in the Gospels. In Luke, the births of both John the Baptizer and Jesus are announced by the angel Gabriel. Their Mothers are cousins, and Mary goes to Elizabeth while they are both pregnant. When they reach adulthood, both Jesus and John are prophets. In fact, many of Jesus' early followers thought that perhaps Jesus was another John the Baptist, and many of John the Baptist's early followers believed him to be the Messiah. Both men preached about repentance, which literally means change, and Jesus and John both wanted humanity to change its course so that we are more focused on God. As a result of their work, both men became victims to Roman political leaders who sacrificed the lives of both Jesus and John to appease mobs. John was beheaded because he questioned the morality of Herodias Antipas. Jesus was killed because Pilate did not want to go against the crowd that yelled "crucify him." In a whole host of ways, Jesus and John were parallel creatures, and because of that, their flags and depictions may be flown at the same height. They bear a relationship to the American and Texas flag protocol.

But just because Texas can fly its tacky flag at the same height as the Betsy Ross inspired American one, does not mean that Texas and America are equal. Texas might be *like* a whole other country, but the US actually is one. And likewise, Jesus and John are not equal. If we continue reading right after today's Gospel reading, this might be exemplified. Right after today's reading, John says to a crowd, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.... Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Difficult, to say the least. John believed that humanity had become so corrupted that God would have to come and sort the good from the bad, and subsequently simply throw out the bad. He looked at the Roman authorities and declared them unjust. He looked at the chosen people who were the most prepared to greet the messiah, and he saw how woefully unprepared even they were. He looked at how the Temple authorities who were in cahoots with the corrupt Romans and demanded change. He railed against injustice and the pagan corruption of the Temple. And he was convinced that God would punish the evil offenders and put things right. John was scandalized by all that he saw that was not focused on God. And John baptized people, preached repentance as a way of avoiding the impending wrath.

And John was correct in part of his assumption. It was true that the people needed to change. And it was certainly true that their course of events would result in wrath, namely a war between the Romans and Israelites that would lead to the destruction of the Temple. And it was also true that God was coming to be with God's people, and that many people were unprepared for whom Jesus would be. However, when God arrives the message of Jesus is different than the message of John. Jesus does not bring an axe to chop down unfruitful trees.

Jesus saw the very same problems as John. But Jesus also believed that John's enraged, scandalized approach to the problem was only more evidence of the problem. To fight fire with fire was not helpful or godly for Jesus. Jesus, instead offers us a two part approach. The first is like John: Jesus first honestly looks at the world and says that the present course of events is not working. And secondly, unlike John the Baptist, instead of shaming us or reigning with fire, Jesus softly, carefully, repeatedly methodically offers us a response to those problems. Jesus invites us to do something unique: approach even what is wrong with this life with the love of God. Approach our enemies with the love of God. Approach those parts of ourselves that we wish could be better with the love of God. Approach John the Baptist's judgement with the love of God. Approach all that frustrates us about life with the love of God. Approach all those parts of our lives, our families, and our world that seem to be lacking or in pain with the love of God. Approach even Texans with the love of God.

This Advent season, what would it be like for us to approach the problems of our world and our lives and even the lines in the check out with the radically self-giving love of God. What if we did not need to be scandalized by all that goes wrong, people who disagree, or people who bear hostility? What would it be like to not need to be in rivalry with anyone, even our parents at the Christmas dinner table? I tell you that if we take that approach into our lives, we will be doing more than invoking the memory of Jesus with this holiday season and this Christmas, we will be bringing Jesus to life. And we will be inviting him once more to dwell with us. That is our hope and our joy as we journey toward Christmas: we get to invite God, once again, to dwell among us.