

Text: Luke 3:1-18  
Title: Rogue Witness  
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Sarah Palin ~ former Vice Presidential Candidate, former Governor of Alaska ~ recently wrote a book entitled Going Rogue: An American Life. Maybe you've heard of her? She's been zigzagging the country by private bus and private plane to promote the book. She has saturated talk shows and magazines and websites. Whether to trash her, thrash her, or throne her she has been omnipresent in the media.

Going Rogue is an autobiography. So, I am not sure why the news agency fact checkers worked themselves into lather checking every sentence for its veracity. Sarah Palin ~ no matter what you may think about her ~ is trying to present herself as she perceives herself.

She is trying to tell her own story on her own terms.

She is trying to write her own narrative.

She is trying to portray herself.

The picture that she paints is of an outsider. She is outside of the Beltway, outside of Hollywood, outside of the biased-mean-spirited-media-elites, outside of power, outside of big business and big government, outside of the intellectuals, outside of the establishment, outside of politics as usual. She is just a common sense American ~ dressed in a snowmobile suit and eating moose meat. She is a gun totin', church goin', plain speakin' mom who believes in family, faith, and freedom. She is an independent voice from Alaska ~ that last frontier of the great American west, where if you get knocked down you get back up. She is a voice calling from the wilderness of Wasilla. In her words:

*...too many of us have felt ignored and have become disillusioned. Many Americans don't even vote because they have come to expect government to be indifferent ~ or corrupt. I want to challenge those Americans to stand up with me. The enlightened elites want to tell you to sit down and shut up. But the way forward is to stand and fight. Throw tea parties. March on Capital Hill. Write letters to the editor. Run for local office ~ you never know where it may lead. And make your voice heard on every single election day, on every single issue. That is your birthright. Stand now. Stand together. Stand for what is right.*

Sarah Palin ~ no matter what you think of her ~ is trying to portray herself as an outsider with an alternative narrative. And, in that, Sarah Palin is not unlike Luke's picture of John the Baptist....

*For that comparison I offer apologies to Luke and John, their families, the Palins, liberals, conservatives, Democrats, Republicans, and Christians everywhere. I know the comparison is a cheesy stretch, but bear with me.*

Luke is writing a gospel and not unlike an autobiography it has a certain agenda. It tells the story with a certain slant to make a certain point. So, Luke starts by positioning John the Baptist as an outsider. The narrative arc of the advent of Jesus begins in the wilderness.

But, Luke first sets the political framework:

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...*

That is one emperor, one governor, three regional rulers, and a couple high priests. Those are the powerful insiders, the enlightened elites, the emblems of the empire. They are the architects of the political-religious complex. But, from out the wilderness ~

with no power or pedigree,

with no significant social status,

with no degree or designation ~ comes a different voice.

Dressed in a camel hair suit, cinched up with a leather belt, and eating locusts and wild honey, John is a rogue witness announcing an alternative narrative.

I was reminded this week, by a wise and winsome fellow, that Max De Pree describes leadership this way, “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant.”

John the Baptist is defining reality. He is offering a different interpretation about the nature of reality than the interpretation perpetuated by the empire. He is framing everything differently. One could paraphrase John’s message this way:

*Look, you’ve been lied to by the politicians and marketers.*

*You’ve been misled by the fashion magazines and the power brokers.*

*You’ve been duped by the fancy pants preachers and the myth makers.*

*You have a false picture of reality.... You bunch of snakes....*

*This is reality ~ God is coming!*

*God is coming to restore creation to shalom, to put the world to rights (Advent One).*

*God is coming to judge (Advent Two).*

*God is coming, so repent and be baptized.*

Dear friends, what is your reality this morning?

I met with a woman who was mired in the messy muddled trough of depression. She talked about how hard it was to get up in the morning. Everything in her wanted to rollover and hope that sleep would slip in easy again, and maybe some dream would be better than facing another day. But, dredging up all the courage she could find she would get up and go through the motions. She talked about feeling distant from her own life and disconnected from her own story. She was bent inward where everything was dappled dark and hope felt flimsy. She talked about feeling trapped by lethargy and loathing ~ locked in place, like she was sleep walking.

Now, I know that depression is a complicated mix of genetics and situation and disposition and chemical imbalance and mystery, but it struck me how distorted and profoundly false her picture of her self was.....

She was writing her own autobiography, but she was writing a liturgy of lies. Over and over again, her interpretation of reality was simply false. Whether the result of the cultural curriculum, or a nuero-chemical mix, or the result of learned behavior in childhood, or something spiritual, or who knows what....

Her self portrait was a lie. True to her ~ but a twisted lie by any other standard. And, she couldn't feel the sun of God's grace on her shoulders or settle into her own giftedness, because what she saw was a drab, gray, slog.

Dear friends, what is your reality this morning?

I'm reminded again and again that our pictures of reality are stained and skewed by our own histories, our cultural narratives, and our practiced liturgies.

And, don't be fooled! The mall, Fox News, MTV, American evangelicalism, American exceptionalism, the Daily Show, etc, they all offer compelling interpretations of reality. They all offer liturgical practices. They all would shape and shade the way we see ourselves and our world.

Well...

Well, what if with a voice from the wilderness John is announcing an alternative reality.

The intrusion of the gospel is not just a sweet story about a babe away in a manger with no crib and no crying. But, the gospel is a stunning story that completely turns everything upside down. It is the swinging of axe that goes to the root and changes the garden. It is nothing less than an act of recreation. From outside of the empire there comes

a new vision,  
a new world order,  
a new way of being,  
a new covenant,  
a new kingdom,  
a new politic....

William Willimon frames it this way:

*What must we do to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom?" Unfortunately, we often respond by urging people to sit quietly in lavender churches, reflect upon the state of their souls and feel sad about their peccadilloes. But John will have none of this. He knows that when one is faced with so great and different a kingdom as this, one must repent. One must turn around, through deeds as costly, specific and particular as sharing clothing and food.*

*Unfortunately, we have psychologized the gospel, turned it into a feeling. We have transformed the Kingdom of God into a mood. We have deluded ourselves into thinking that the Messiah whom we await is the great cosmic affirmer of everything we hold dear and of all our illusions.*

Gulp! It doesn't feel much like Christmas when the hairy guy waiting in the wings is John the Baptist and not Santa Claus.

Dear friends, no matter what your reality this morning, the good news is that there is a different reality, a real reality ;-). A reality that is defined by a God who loves the cosmos so much that he emptied himself and entered as a baby ~ born to a poor couple who lived on the edge of the wilderness.

The good news is that there is a different reality, a real reality that is defined by a God who loves you so much that he would empty himself unto death, even death on the cross of the empire, between two common criminals.

The good news is that there is a different reality, a real reality, a reality where death doesn't have the last word.

And how should we live in response to this new reality?  
I like how simple and direct John is. Again my paraphrase:

*If you're rich enough to have two shirts ~ give one to the naked guy. And, and.... if you've got food ~ give to the hungry. If you traffic in business, if you work in the exchange of goods and services ~ don't charge more or collect more than is just. Don't gouge for excessive profit just because you can. If you have power, if you're part of the political-religious complex, or if you're part of the military-industrial complex, don't use that power in a way that extorts or abuses, but be content to be a servant of others. And be baptized because there is one coming who will baptize with an unquenchable fire.*

Dear friends, no matter what your reality this morning....

You belong to Jesus.

You are new politics.

You are God's own children.

Rest in your baptism. Live out of that reality....

For the Messiah is coming.

And he will restore creation to *shalom*.

And, he will judge with mercy.

And he will inaugurate a new reality.

Thanks be to God.