

**LIVES ESTRANGED: GOD, OTHERS AND SELF**  
**Sermon: December 6, 2009**  
**Advent 2C**

**Texts:** *Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6*

Most of you may not know that I come from very large families. My father grew up in rural South Carolina and was one of twelve boys, of which three currently survive, including my father. My mother grew up in Chicago and was also one of 8 boys and 4 girls, of which 10 currently survive, including my mother.

I'd like to tell you a story about one of my mother's brothers, my uncle Bob. It will be a short story, however, because I really don't know much about my uncle Bob. Bob, like all of my mother's brothers and sister, raised in family in the Chicago area. I do not know the name of his wife. I do not know the names of his children (thought I am told that there were three children). And I wouldn't be able to recognize Uncle Bob if I met him on the street. The only time I saw Uncle Bob was back in the early 70's when he made a surprise appearance at my grandmother's funeral. He was a no-show, however, two years later when my grandfather passed away.

Something happened long ago to cause a separation between Uncle Bob and the rest of the family. Nobody really talks about it. But whatever it was, it created a deep relational chasm between him and the rest of the family. The word to describe this is estrangement.

The word *estrangle* means literally "to treat as a stranger". It describes what occurs when family members or friends become distanced or cut-off from each other. Certain words, actions, or events cause two or more people who were once in a relationship to become strangers to each other. Sadly, there are many stories of estrangement in my extended family systems. I suspect that there are similar stories in many of yours.

Theologian Paul Tillich uses the same word "estrangement" to describe the state of human existence. He argues that as human beings we are estranged from three things. We are estranged from God (Tillich uses the term "Ground of Being"). We are estranged from other beings. And we are estranged even from ourselves. Tillich states that although "estrangement is not a biblical term...it is "implied in most of the biblical descriptions of man's predicament."

According to Tillich:

- It is implied in the symbols of the expulsion from paradise, in the hostility between man and nature, in the deadly hostility of brother against brother, in the estrangement of nation from nation through the confusion of language, and in the continuous complaints of the prophets against their kings and people who turn to alien Gods.

- Estrangement is implied in Paul's statement that man perverted the image of god into that of idols, in his classical description of "man against himself", in his vision of man's hostility against man as combined with his distorted desires.

[Systematic Theology, Volume Two, p. 46-47]

It is not God's intent that we live in estrangement from God, and from each other and from ourselves. Tillich defines **sin** as "the personal act of turning away from that to which one belongs." He defines **salvation** as the act of "reuniting that which is estranged...overcoming the split between God and man, man and his world, man and himself. (p. 116). He defines **love** as the opposite of estrangement, for love seeks reunion of that which is separated: "In faith and love, sin is conquered because estrangement is overcome by reunion."

Our Advent lessons for today provide us with readings which collectively offer a vision of a day when God's salvation will come to overcome our human experience of estrangement and we will be reconciled with God, with each other, and with ourselves. I would like to focus exclusively on our two readings from the Gospel of Luke.

The passage from the first chapter of Luke contains what is called the Song of Zechariah. The first part of this song (verses 68-75) celebrates how God has come to set his people free from estrangement by raising up a mighty Savior, born of the house of David. Though the people of Israel have turned their back on their relationship with God, God promises to maintain the promises he made in the covenant of Abraham. The second part of the song celebrates not only God's saving acts, but also promises God will send someone before the savior to "prepare the way" and alert God's people that God's salvation is at hand.

The passage from the third chapter of Luke places the beginning of these promised acts of God in a specific time and place:

**The time:**

- In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; when Herod was ruler of Galilee; when Herod's brother Philip was ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachniitis; when Lysanias was ruler of Abilene; when Annas and Caiaphas were high priests

**The place:**

- In the wilderness – to a man named John, son of Zechariah. Luke says the word of God comes to John and he begins to proclaim a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is not by accident that the word of God which proclaims the acts of God which make it possible to overcome man's estrangement from God, from others, and from himself comes to a man living in a place of estrangement. In the wilderness you are alone. In the wilderness it is as if you are alienated from all things that give life.

When the word comes to John in the wilderness and he begins to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, this is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah. These prophecy states that one day there will be the voice of one

crying out in the wilderness, saying "Prepare the way of the Lord." In other words, the Lord is coming! And at the very end of the prophecy, we read these words: "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." All living creatures will know that God has acted to bring about reconciliation and peace, overcoming human sin which causes us to be alienated from and stranger to God, to others and to ourselves.

Dear brothers and sisters gathered in the name of Jesus who is the Christ. Christmas is the celebration of God's salvation coming to us in human form in the one we know as Jesus. Through Jesus God makes know God's love for us and desire for us to be in relationship with God, with each other and with ourselves. Advent is the time when we remind ourselves of how painful it is to live lives of estrangement. Advent is a time to help clear away those barriers that prevent life-giving relationships. Advent is a time to open our heart, mind, and spirit to God's reconciling love. Thanks be to God. Amen.