

December 9, 2018 Second Sunday of Advent  
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Listen to these names...and imagine with me what it might mean for a story to begin this way:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness...

Substitute...if you like...whatever names might fit in a similar list if the story was to begin here, today...

What rulers shape the landscape...what public figures would be our historical markers along the road we are currently travelling?

Now...hold that thought...and go back to the list we just heard:

Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, Caiaphas...and John and Zechariah. Now...imagine you had to take a history quiz right now about who each of those people were. (Ok...the 5 history serious history buffs in the room just got excited very quietly...and the rest of us just had a flashback to the last time we got a marked up test shoved handed back from a teacher...)

Seriously though...scan a second...what do you remember, if anything, about Tiberius? Pontius Pilate...maybe a little more there...? Herod...yeah, ok...familiar-ish...if you can remember which one...Philip? Lysanias? This is the moment in the quiz when any building sense of confidence maybe drops out from under you again...Annas and Caiaphas? Maybe, again, a little something...especially if you're also into Andrew Lloyd Weber musicals. For y'all...we'll add some extra credit questions about the story of Joseph in Genesis.

Now – how about John...and his father Zechariah?

Do you remember the prophet in the wilderness, crying out, calling for repentance, preparing God's way? What about his dad? The one who was suddenly unable to speak when he didn't believe his wife Elizabeth could possibly be pregnant, after years of being childless...

We usually skip to the action of these stories...Of course we do. They're lots of fun. But a scene is being set for us...and I want us to look up and out and the surroundings of this story.

I want us to remember this backdrop of power...to carry it with us as we come closer each day to the mystery of Christmas...This backdrop matters...because everything that God is about to do happens under its shadow...even though God will soon enough overcome it all...

There is another thing about this beginning (and there are scholars who think this might have been the original beginning of Luke's gospel...that chapters one and two were a later addition...a sort of prologue). Regardless of whether that is the case, one thing Luke is laying out for us as the story begins is something we have some pretty heated feelings about in the church right now...but I can't get around it today.

This is a political story...and I don't mean that in any kind of partisan hackish way. I mean that Luke is telling us that it matters to the story we are entering, that it happens within the realm of the power of these people. This is not a story dislocated from time and space...

Politics is, fundamentally, how a community of a people in a particular place manage their connected lives. That's it. And the gospel...the work of preparing for the kingdom of God, which is close at hand...for the mystery of Christmas, itself, simply cannot happen apart from that. In that way, this is a political story...and we should stop being afraid of that. We should also stop wielding that truth as a weapon. But we should stop being afraid to claim a political gospel...because without the political...without human communities in particular places, with particular needs, challenges, and gifts...the gospel is just another story on the shelf. In community, within the sphere of the political...is precisely where the story comes alive...where its lungs fill with air and it speaks...where it becomes incarnate.

And in Luke, the story takes on flesh and bone and breath under the looming shadows of Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Philip, Lysanius, Annas, and Caiaphas. But now I want you to try to remember our quiz. Think about what you know about those people. Now think about what you know about John and his father...and his aunt...and her son. Think about what you know about Mary.

It would have just happened a few verses ago, if we were reading through Luke in order...though we will actually be reading it out of order and hearing it next week instead...

In Luke's first chapter, the young woman Mary sings a song, after the angel announces the strange miracle that is about to be born from her. She sings of the lowly lifted up and the mighty cast down...

And if you ever wanted to know if her song was just another nice story...if this was all just another book on the shelf like so many others...remember...that you know more about the name and story of a poor unmarried pregnant teenager who was a subject in the Roman empire than any of those people who were considered like gods in their time...whose names were on monuments, buildings and money...

Whose song do we sing? Mary's song... "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." And Zechariah's song... "In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us..." words from an old man, an unlikely father, who lost his voice...and could easily have disappeared into silence and obscurity...but who instead found his voice when his son John the Baptist was born and sang of hope and the love of God.

We will end today in a place that isn't really an ending...as befits the season of Advent. It is an episode that is "to be continued..."

We will end in the wilderness with John...where the gospel writer says he grew up. He didn't wander out there one day as an adult. He was shaped, prepared, maybe hardened...by the wilderness. It was his home. Dr. Michal Beth Dinkler, who teaches New Testament at Yale points this out...and reminds us that the wilderness is a place of scarcity, yes...a place of struggle...but it is also a place of growth, of spiritual clarity...it is a place where God's people grow and come close to God. God provides for the people...and God has provided for John...who calls out now to the people to tell them to be serious about the hard work of preparing for God's kingdom...

The wilderness is a hard place...and it is also a place of provision. Everything that matters is born in a particular place, at a particular time, under the shadow of particular powers that may try to block out the warmth of the sun or the comfort of its light. It is because of this that God's arrival matters...that we wait as eagerly as we do...and that we rejoice with Mary and Zechariah and Elizabeth and John...whose names we know better than the ones who thought they could live forever. Because our God is doing a new thing. Was then. Is now. And ever shall be. Thanks be to God. Amen.