

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 9, 2018
Advent 2
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 126
Philippians 1:1-11
Luke 3:1-6

In our Gospel lesson today, Luke introduces us to John the Baptist by placing him right alongside the major actors on the world stage.

Luke says: "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 Abilne -- during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, *the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.*

Why does Luke do this? What does the message of an obscure prophet have to do with kings, emperors, governors, and high priests?

Luke's answer to that question: *Everything!*

The message of an obscure prophet has everything do with the political and religious power brokers of the world, but this is easy to miss because John doesn't make his way onto the scene with any real pomp or fanfare.

But that seems to be the nature of the Christian Gospel. The Christian story, and the promises that come with it, always has that mustard-seed quality to it. It

seems so small that it can be easy to miss. Yet like the mustard seed, the story sneaks in, unawares, small and insignificant, until it grows and spreads, infesting whole fields and inviting all kinds of creatures to take refuge in its branches.

By telling the story the way he does, Luke is saying that God is at work *not in the political and religious power brokers of the world, but in the weak and the small and the nondescript of the world*. God is using babies and barren women, unwed teenage mothers, wild-eyed, fashioned challenged prophets, and executed criminals, to reconcile the world to Himself.

And God hasn't stopped there. God continues to work through unlikely people today. People like unpopular teens and out-of-work adults. People like volunteer coaches and stay-at-home parents, underpaid secretaries and night-shift workers. God uses people like this (**and people like us**) to announce the news that God is up to something big, something that saves and transforms us. *It's a promise so ordinary that it is quite easy to miss.*

There is one more thing about what Luke does here that we should note. Luke doesn't merely locate the preaching of John the Baptist alongside the major power brokers of the world. He sets him and his message *against* them.

In these verses Luke doesn't merely mention a couple of the world's key players. He lists *seven* of them. As you read it, it sounds like a drumbeat of political and religious powers marching off to war: *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 ruled the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruled Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...

And against all of these stands paltry, insignificant John, son of Zechariah. Well, not quite. Against all of these stands paltry, insignificant John -- *and the Word of the Lord*. The Word that calls on people to fill valleys and level mountains, to straighten what is crooked and smooth over the rough places, so that a path might be laid where God can bring His love and mercy.

Seven mighty people representing the collective power of the world, and *against them all stands just John, armed only with God's Word, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and pointing people to the Savior who is to come.*

Most scholars believe that Luke wrote his Gospel sometime around the year 85 A.D. This means that by the time Luke's community reads these words that we have read today, *none of these seven power brokers was still alive*. All had passed from the scene. *Yet we are still telling the story of John and of Jesus, the One John proclaimed*. And today these powerful people are mere footnotes to the story of Christ, the One sent to reveal God's salvation to all people.

This can be important for us, because at times we may feel like we are confronted by powers and forces whose strength seems insurmountable. We may be facing challenges at work with a boss or with co-workers. We may be facing family issues where we're caring for aging parents or struggling to help children find their way. We may be facing challenges to our health, and the adjustments that accompany growing older. We may be facing discouragement or even depression.

But the message of Advent shows us that the challenges you face in your life are temporary and temporal, and in time will pass, even as these mighty political and religious leaders Luke mentions passed from the scene. God is at work in the ordinary people and circumstances of life, bringing His grace and salvation to all of those who have the patience and courage to wait it out, and to trust that their momentary afflictions will yield to God's larger purposes.

It's a promise so ordinary that it can easily be missed. But it's a promise whispered to each of us today in the bread and the wine, and in the Word of the Lord that John so eloquently proclaimed.

So come with faith. Open your hearts, and claim this promise for yourself. Then continue to watch and wait for his coming.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.