

This text from Luke is a liturgist's worst nightmare. If the preacher calls you during the week and asks you to read this passage on Sunday morning the best thing for you to do is hang up the phone immediately! The first two verses alone are a mouthful! Listen to this: "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 Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." Wow! What was all that about? What was Luke thinking when he wrote those two verses? Other than being extremely boring and tedious to read, let alone listen to, what was the point? Why on earth do we need to know that all this happened in the fifteenth year of Emperor Tiberius's rule? Why is it necessary for you and me to know that Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea at the time and that Herod was ruler of Galilee? On the one hand, it is not necessary. It matters very little what the names were of the rulers of the day. But on the other hand, it is important. It's important because this story takes place in a specific time in a specific place with specific people. In other words, this is real. This is not some made up fairy tale. Emperor Tiberius existed, as did Pontius Pilate and Herod, and Luke wanted to make sure that all the players in this story were identified up front. He was setting the stage for the greatest story of all time.

After going through this list of "who's who" Luke introduces John the Baptist. John the Baptist was the forerunner for Jesus. He was the one who God called to "prepare the way of the Lord." John was an interesting character to say the least. He ate locusts and wild honey and wore clothing made out of camel's hair. People from all over Judea went out to see John the Baptist. He had quite a following.

I like John because he didn't have a problem saying exactly what was on his mind. Can anyone here relate to that? Do you know anyone who blurts out whatever is on his or her mind? It doesn't matter if the words hurt someone else's feelings, they just pop off anyway. They are too open and forthcoming for their own good. These are the kind of people who tell you exactly how they are doing when you ask them. We might ask someone as we pass by, "How are you today?" The normal person would say, "Fine, how are you?" and then go on his or her way. Then there is the forthcoming person. We ask, "How are you doing?" and they respond, "Well, I'm kind of down in my back today. I took my lawn mower in for service the other

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day, and I think I tweaked something in my back when I lifted the lawn mower out of the pickup. I bought that lawnmower from my neighbor and didn't have any trouble with it at first, but lately it's been acting up. It takes me forever to get it started, besides that, the blades need to be sharpened. Last time I took it to the lawnmower shop it took three weeks for them to finish servicing it. I just don't understand why it takes so long to service one of these things. Oh well, I better be going." "Nice talking to you."

John the Baptist does not fall in the "lawnmower guy" category. John was not forthcoming in that way. John was forthcoming in the right way. John knew what God had called him to do and he did it faithfully. John was to prepare the way of the Lord. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" John was to prepare the way for Jesus and he did just that by preaching a message of repentance. In Matthew's gospel John is quoted as saying, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." His message was an urgent one. It was time to get the house in order because the Messiah was on his way.

It's interesting that the word of God came to John the Baptist not in a synagogue or the temple or in a prayer meeting, but in the wilderness. The word of God and the preparation for the ministry of Jesus came to this outcast, loner type in the wilderness of all places. Very often God's word and revelation come to us in the "wilderness". We may not be dressed up in clothing of camel's hair and eating locusts for breakfast, but we have our wildernesses nonetheless. We have those times when it seems like we are in the wilderness and for us to think that God would speak to us in those situations and circumstances might seem ridiculous.

There is the wilderness of doubt. We just don't know what to believe anymore. We look at the world around us and it seems as if it is spinning out of control, and we wonder if God has anything at all to do with us. There is the wilderness of depression, especially during this time of the year. There are countless numbers of us who struggle with depression. Some of us know we are depressed, while others of us have yet to put our finger on the condition. There is the wilderness of addiction. We don't want to be addicted to whatever it is that has a grip on our lives, but we just can't seem to quit.

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A wilderness can be a scary place to live, but it can also be a place of renewal and revelation. God has a way of speaking to us in special ways in the midst of the wilderness. Just when we think there is no hope at all, it is then that God creates new possibilities. That is exactly what God did through John the Baptist in the wilderness. John was preparing the way for a new direction. Jesus, the Messiah, was coming and everything would change. The incarnation of God revealed in Jesus Christ literally turned the world upside down.

This time of year the greeting card businesses and post offices are smiling. Just think of all the Christmas cards that are purchased and mailed. We like to receive Christmas cards and thanks to all of you who have been so kind to send us a card. It's interesting to look at the different designs on the cards. Some cards have a Santa Claus, others have a snow-covered hillside decorated with lights, and then there are those with religious designs. I'll never forget a Christmas card I came upon several years ago. It was a picture of Mary and Joseph holding the baby Jesus. There was nothing unusual about the picture, but what was unusual was the expression on the faces of Mary and Joseph. Instead of a nice, serene smile, they had a look of complete shock. It was as if they had seen a ghost. I think of all the Christmas cards I've ever seen maybe that one was the most realistic. They were not just holding a baby. They were holding the Son of God, and this child would grow up to change and ultimately redeem the world.

Let's go back to that list of names we talked about earlier – Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod and the rest. Those were some pretty powerful people. If you were to ask anyone living at the time who was more powerful, Emperor Tiberius or baby Jesus, chances are you would get laughed out of the room. But you and I both know that Tiberius and Pilate and Herod are mere footnotes on the pages of history, and that Jesus Christ is alive and well. Sure, Tiberius was a powerful person. He could no doubt snap his fingers and have whatever he wanted. There are “powerful” people in every generation. From government to business to schools there are those who have “power” and those who don't, but let's be clear about the word “power”. Power, according to the world, means money and influence and titles. If the President of the United States were to walk in this sanctuary this morning chances are he would get a lot more attention than an elderly widow visiting for the first time. Why is that? They are both children of God created by the same God, but one just happens to work as an elected official and one does not. In God's eyes they are equal and God loves each

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one of them, but in our eyes we see a difference. Based on the structure of our society and government, we have given this one person, the President, more stature and prestige. I realize that's an extreme example but you get the point.

Luke was saying much the same thing when he went down the list of rulers. I think Luke's point was this: "If you think these guys are powerful, wait until you get a load of Jesus! Wait until Jesus comes on the scene."

This Advent season we are waiting for the coming of the Christ child, and when he arrives we might be surprised at what we find. It didn't take long for the people living in Jesus' day to figure out that he was different and looked at the world differently. Jesus could have cared less about the power structures of government and the religious establishment, and to be honest, that is what led, in part at least, to his crucifixion. Jesus upset the apple cart and ticked off enough of the wrong people to get in big trouble.

I think the message is clear for us – this baby Jesus will not be manipulated by us and our desires. Jesus came into this world not for the purpose of making us "happy" or to fulfill our wants. He came to challenge our way of living and ultimately offer us another way – the way of love, grace, and forgiveness.

I strongly believe that things never have to stay the way they are. With God as the real source of power in our world, there is no telling what can happen. In his book "Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?" Philip Yancey told a story about what happened in Romania in the 1980's.

In the 1980's, a pastor named Laszlo Tokes took over a small Reformed church to minister to his fellow Hungarians, an oppressed minority living inside the borders of Romania. His predecessor had openly supported the communist Romanian government, even to the extent of wearing a red star on his clerical robes. In contrast, Tokes spoke out against injustice and protested government actions. Soon the sanctuary began filling each Sunday, bringing together worshipers and dissidents of both Romanian and Hungarian descent. Membership grew from forty persons to five thousand.

The courageous new pastor attracted the attention of special agents as well. They threatened him many times with violence. Word spread quickly

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and hundreds of Christians – Baptist, Orthodox, Reformed, and Catholic alike – poured out of their homes to surround Tokes’s house as a wall of protection. They stood through day and night, singing hymns and holding candles.

A few days later, police broke through the protestors to seize Tokes. Rather than dispersing and filing home, the protestors decided to march downtown to the police station. As the procession moved noisily through the streets, more and more people joined in. Eventually the crowd in the town square swelled to 200,000, nearly the entire population of that area. The Romanian army sent in troops, who in one bloody incident opened fire on the crowd, killing a hundred and wounding many more. Still the people held their ground, refusing to disperse.

A local pastor stood to address the protestors in an attempt to calm the rising anger and prevent a full-scale riot. He began with three words, “Let us pray.” In one spontaneous motion that giant mass of farmers, teachers, students, doctors, and ordinary working people fell to their knees and recited the Lord’s Prayer – a corporate act of civil disobedience. Within days the protest spread to the capital city of Bucharest, and a short time later the government that had ruled Romania with an iron fist toppled to the ground. Who would have ever thought that a bunch of people getting together to pray could do something like that?

It’s funny how that works. You never know where the real power resides. Or do you?