

Advent 2, Year C

December 9, 2018

Luke 3:1-6

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. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley 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.’”

“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...”

Had there been television in John the Baptist’s day, these are the names that would have been on the evening news. The rulers of the world; the leaders of the church. These were the Donald Trumps, the John Hickenloopers, the Mitch McConnells, the Pope Francis and Franklin Grahams of the First Century. These were the people who had power and influence, the people who made headlines; the people who *mattered*. Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, Caiaphas – their names would *certainly* have popped up on the evening news.

But listen to the rest of that sentence from today’s Gospel: 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.***

Not to the emperor in Rome, or to any of the other rulers Luke mentions; not to the high priests in Jerusalem. The word of God came to a nobody by the name of John in a no-place called the wilderness.

Now, if God’s word is not to be found amongst the movers and shakers of the world who appear on the evening news, where are you and I to look for the word of God today – assuming we even *want* to look for the word of God? Where do we focus our attention, and from where do we seek the ultimate meaning of our lives?

In our media-saturated world, what draws our daily attention is often whatever news or commentary happens to appear on the television or radio, in the newspaper, on Facebook or Twitter, or on our smartphones or iPads. This media-chosen content and commentary can easily become our reality, which determines the topics of our conversations, what we think about, and what we think matters. It is so easy for us to let the media create our reality.

Author Frederick Buechner, writing 25 years ago, before Facebook and Twitter and iPads and smartphones and before most of us had even *heard* of the internet, wrote: “When the evening news comes on, hundreds of thousands of people all over the earth are watching it on their TV screens or listening to it on their radios. Disasters and scandals [among people of power]... crimes of passion [and violence], perpetual wars... — people sit there by the millions half dazed by the things that go to create each particular day...”¹ These are the images, stories, and commentaries which the media chooses to show us; and therefore they create our days and become our reality from which we interpret meaning for our lives.

Buechner continues: “[But] there is also, of course, the news that rarely if ever gets into the media at all, and that is the news of each particular day of each particular one of us... [T]he unextraordinary, commonplace events of each day as they come along we tend to let slip by almost unnoticed. **That** is, to put it mildly, a pity. [For,] what we are letting slip by almost unnoticed are the only lives on this planet we’re presumably ever going to get.

“...But these [commonplace] things are what it’s all about. These [commonplace] things are what **we** are all about.”¹

My friends, I think this is what Luke is saying in our Gospel when he first directs our focus to the powers that be on the world stage, and then moves his camera offstage – far offstage – to John in the wilderness. Luke is saying that if we are truly looking for the word of God, perhaps our focus needs to be not so much on the news of the powers that be in our world, and all the political arguments and intrigue that swirl around them; perhaps our focus needs to be on “the news of each particular day of each particular one of us...” and of those who live around us. By saying that the word of God came to an ordinary person in the wilderness, away from the centers of the world’s power, Luke is saying that the word of God comes also to **us** in our *own* wildernesses, in our own common lives.

God comes to us each day – each moment! – of our lives, mostly unnoticed, for our attention is so often drawn elsewhere: to the news of what’s happening in the

White House, or this hurricane or that forest fire or the latest shooting. Our attention is drawn to Black Friday sales that some stores have extended well into this second week of December. Yet, the word of God still comes, as it came to Elijah – not in the fierce wind, or earthquake, or fire, but in “a sound of sheer silence.”² The word of God comes to us in the wilderness of Advent in the form of the simplest of things: the quiet of new-fallen snow blanketing the ground, the sound of a Salvation Army bell, the bland taste of a communion wafer, the eyes of a child, the sight of a homeless person trying to stay warm in Walmart, the grief of a woman dreading her first Christmas without the presence of her husband. The word of God comes, and we will notice **if** we have ears to hear and are awake to its coming. Frederick Buechner writes: “There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him... Listen to your life. [repeat] See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis **all** moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”³

“The God of biblical faith is the God who meets us at those moments in which for better or worse we are being most human, most ourselves, and if we lose touch with those moments, if we don’t stop from time to time to notice what is happening **to** us and **around** us and **inside** us, we run the tragic risk of losing touch with God too.”⁴

My friends, that is the purpose of Advent: It is a time to focus away from the media-created reality centered around the emperors, rulers, and powers that be in our world, and to focus instead on what is happening **to** us, **around** us, and **inside** us. For it is in the here and now of our ordinary, daily lives that the word of God comes.

In the eighteenth year of the twenty-first century, when Donald was President of the United States, and Francis was Pope, and Michael was Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, and John was governor of Colorado, the word of the Lord came to the people of Christ Church, Canon City.

And you and I – ordinary folk unknown to the rest of the world – are being called to listen to the word of God coming even to us, and to embody Christ’s mercy and love in **our** time and in **this** place.

AMEN

¹ Buechner, “News,” <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/5/19/news>

² 1 Kings 19:12, NRSV

³ Originally published in *Now and Then* and later in *Listening to Your Life*

⁴ Originally published in *Telling Secrets*