

You may remember me saying in the past couple weeks, as we've started this new church year focused on Luke's gospel, that Luke's gospel has a sarcastic edge to it - especially where the Romans are concerned. Luke's gospel is, among other things, a politically subversive document intended to destroy the Roman Empire, and history has shown it to be right. The Roman Empire is gone. Luke's gospel is still around.

One of Luke's somewhat sarcastic bits comes at the beginning of our gospel reading for today. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontus 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 Caiphas, the word of God came to... John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness."

Now it would be typical to list the year in an emperor's reign in order to date something. They didn't measure time as we do today with an ever ascending order of numbers - the Year

2012 or the Year 2013. They measured time according to the year into an emperor's reign. So it would be the Third Year of Julius or the Fifteenth Year of Tiberius. But Luke doesn't stop there. He goes on and on - Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, and Lysanias. Those are all the regional political leaders - the head honchos of the day. Then he lists the religious leaders, Annas and Caiaphas; two generations of high priests. He also lists what everyone rules - Judea, Galilee, Iturea and so on. He's so emphatic about all of this because does the Word of God come to any of them? No. And does it come to any important place - Rome, Jerusalem? No. The Word of God comes to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

John was basically a nobody. And while his father was a priest in the temple he was about as low ranking as priests could come. He got to have a turn burning incense at the incense altar a couple times of the year. That was it. He was not a major priest, or the high priest who got to go into the inner sanctum of the sanctuary. And speaking of holy places, John's word comes in the middle of nowhere - the wilderness. What wilderness? There are lots of wilderness areas in the world and it doesn't say. Sure, today someone has designated a

spot where John the Baptist did his work, but that's more to earn tourist dollars than anything else.

God chose a nobody in "nowheresville" to be his messenger to prepare the way for his coming. Why does God work this way? Well I don't know for sure, but I do know some things about those high and mighty people Luke lists.

The Emperor Tiberius was noted for deporting all Jews from the city of Rome. His last years as emperor were marked by serious mental decline and have been characterized as a period of pure terror. Jews of the time described Pilate as, "inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness." They also list briberies, insults, robberies, outrages, wanton injuries, executions without trial, and endless savage ferocity. (Philo Leg. Gai 37 301-2) Herod and Philip had no sensitivity to the people they ruled and were cruel manipulators. We don't know much about Lysanias. As for the high priests, they were no different than many political leaders today. They leveraged their religious clout for their own ends and the ends of the religious elite - all the while claiming it was God's will.

How would such people use the Word of God; especially the Word that God was sending... about being self-giving and vulnerable? This is not how power works. The Bible shows us how they receive the Word of God. At best they ignored it. At worst they tried to destroy it as we can see by the way they had Jesus killed.

God's Word came to those who could hear it. John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness could hear the Word of God. And he could do something with it. He proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God. He used the status he achieved with people not to point to himself, but to point to Jesus. We want to do the same. Jesus' teaching in the Bible encourage us to do it.

It's hard to find examples of famous people who live like this in our day. It was probably hard in Jesus' day too. But I can think of some recent examples whose faith-filled nature was recognized. Mother Theresa was noted for her constant work on India on behalf of others. Albert Schweitzer is another - and you may not know as well. He was a German organist, theologian, pastor, scientist, philosopher, physician and medical missionary in the first half of the 20th century. He worked tirelessly on

behalf of people in Africa and for good stewardship of resources. You may be familiar with his *Reverence For Life* writings. He did win a Nobel Peace Prize for it in 1952. In some things I agree with him, in some things I don't. But one thing is certain, Schweitzer was a genuinely humble man, living in mean circumstances and never complaining.

There is a story about a time that Schweitzer was touring through Europe and at a certain city the local dignitaries came to the train station to greet him on his arrival. The train pulled up and stopped. Passengers began to disembark. They looked for this Nobel Prize winner among the first class passengers. He wasn't there. They looked for him among the second class passengers; still no Schweitzer. Finally they saw him climbing out of a third class car carrying his own suitcase. "Why on earth," they asked, "do you travel third class?" To which he replied, "Because there is no fourth class!"

John the Baptist came to have power through the Word of God. He didn't exploit it. Mother Theresa had a voice that carried throughout the world. She could have been quite wealthy. She didn't exploit it. Albert Schweitzer was one of

the most talented and brilliant people of the 20th Century. He knew the source of his talents was from God. If they bought him fame, he would leverage that fame for the sake of others. If they brought him no glory, that was okay too. He'd gladly work one on one with sick and dying people in his hospital in Africa. And of course, the best example of all, Jesus himself. He is the one we prepare the way for. He comes with all power and glory. The brilliance of Schweitzer, the humility of Mother Theresa, and the ministry of John the Baptist all look pale compared to Jesus. Jesus was all knowing, all talented, all powerful. Nothing was beyond his grasp. He was and is the greatest person to ever live. It would be incredibly tempting to use such power for selfish reasons. But as Jesus embodied God's true nature, such power is to build up others, not himself.

The Word of God came to John the Baptist in the wilderness. The Word of God comes to you too. You are not too small, too weak, or too ignorant to be given that Word. You do not live too far from Washington D.C. or New York City or anywhere to be effective. Who you are and where you are is what God has chosen to bear his Word to the world.

In this holiday season where many people are crazy busy remember to let your every word and every action proclaim the goodness of our coming Lord. Amen