

Advent 2C: Luke 3
Church of the Good Shepherd
The. Rev. W. Terry Miller
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Coming to a Wilderness Near You

Legend has it that the Gospel writer Luke was a physician by trade; other legends say he was an artist. Anyone who has studied his Gospel, though, will tell you that Luke, more than any of the other evangelists, was self-consciously a historian. Not a historian as we would think of today, but a 1st century historian, someone who doesn't just accept other people's claims but who does his own research. "Having investigated everything carefully from the beginning," Luke writes in the opening to his Gospel, he then offers what he calls an "orderly account" of the Gospel story.

In particular, Luke is concerned to locate events in their larger historical context. We see this every Christmas, when we read Luke's Nativity story, which begins: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria." And in today's lesson, Luke locates John's ministry in the context of 1st century Middle Eastern politics: "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..."

But there's more to Luke's listing of historical rulers than fixing a date of the events he describes. All of the people he mentions were high-ranking officials of the day, beginning with the Emperor Tiberias, the ruler of the known world, on down to Pontius Pilate, his representative, the governor of Judea, King Herod, his puppet, then to the High Priests in Jerusalem—from the worldwide to the local. These are the Big Names, the ones everyone would know, the ones that matter.

Except that in Luke's account, they don't. While some of the figures named can be found on world history books, others like Annas and Caiaphas only matter to Jesus' story, and one, Lysanias, isn't mentioned anywhere else besides Luke's Gospel. Nevertheless, Luke doesn't spend much time on them, after giving their names. Indeed, it's as if Luke only mentions these men in order to turn the camera away from them, to another place, far from these high-and-mighty types.

It's like in the film *Forrest Gump*, how a floating feather opens and closes the movie. The feather is a symbol that sometimes the most important people are those we don't see, like Forrest Gump himself. Except in this case I picture the feather as first floating over Herod's palace or Caesar's Roman mansion only to have a gust of wind take the feather up and up and up and then far from these citadels of civilization. The camera follows the feather until it slowly begins to lilt downward out in the middle of a wilderness wasteland, coming to land at the calloused and filthy foot of a wild man called John.

Now, John could have been among these elites himself. He was descended from a long line of Temple priests, on both his father's and his mother's side. But instead of rubbing elbows with the movers and shakers in Jerusalem, John was out in the desert, in the wilderness. That was where the Forest Gump feather landed, where the Word of God came.

Now, it says something that the 'word of God' came not in Jerusalem, in the Temple, where God would have been expected to make himself present, but instead far away in the wilderness, in a wild, uncultivated, deserted place. Luke seems to be telling us, reminding us, that God rarely shows up where we think he should be, among the powerful and the credentialed, but instead comes to the unlikely, to the forgotten, to where we least expect it.

Let those big-wigs launch their policy initiatives, levy their taxes, and expand their empire. Let Caesar write himself into the history books, and let Herod do whatever in the world it was Herod wanted to do. Let the religious folks carry out their sacred duties and keep up the rituals. But if it's God you're looking for—if it's salvation you seek—then ignore all that. Go instead to the desert, to the wilderness. That's where you'll find the Word of God.

It's important here to understand that the 'wilderness' in the Bible has nothing to do with our modern, romantic notions of the wilderness. The wilderness in the Bible is not the place idealized by John Denver, the Sierra Club, and Alaskan frontiersmen. It is not a place of beauty, but a desolate, lonely place, a pathless, trackless wasteland where it is easy to lose one's way, where wild beasts and other threats prowl, a place nobody goes, at least not by choice. The wilderness was where Israel despaired, "The Lord has forgotten me," in Isaiah (49:14) and where Jesus was tested, tempted by Satan to abandon God's plan. 'Wilderness' is a place of vulnerability, of danger, of fear and uncertainty.

Wilderness thus refers to more than just a place, a location. It also describes a state of being, a mental place. It's a metaphor for a terrifying situation where there are no clear paths, where chaos and temptation reign, where loss and despair follow wherever we go.

The people of Israel knew the wilderness well. They had been living in the Promised Land, "a land of milk and honey," for going on a thousand years by Jesus's day, but their presence had long ago ceased to be one of goodness and favor. Four hundred years before Christ, the Israelites had been conquered, and their best and brightest carted off to Babylon to serve the emperor. Many exiled Jews assimilated into the Babylonian society, forgetting who they were and whose they were. Others, though, did not. They refused to accept that this was as good as it gets and longed to return to their home, to the land God had promised them.

They got the chance to do so, fifty years later, when the Persians conquered the Babylonians who had conquered the Jews, and allowed them to return home. Only, where the Jews thought that rebuilding the city walls and the Temple would bring about peace, prosperity, and the return of God's glorious presence, they were instead beset by drought and crop failure, and the land remained occupied territory, still under the authority of a foreign power. Worse, in the place of spiritual restoration, Israel experienced spiritual decline. Even though they were no longer in Babylon, the Israelites were still in exile. They had returned home, but that home was a wilderness, a spiritually barren land.

Many of us know what this is like, we've been in a place of wilderness even in this land of plenty. If you have ever been in the thrall of an addiction, or been diagnosed with a terminal illness, or if you have prayed for years for something but received nothing but silence, then you know what it is to be in the wilderness. If you have been estranged from your family, or betrayed by someone you trusted, or suffered a divorce, then you know what it is to be in the wilderness. If you've lost someone to violence, or suffered persecution, or been forced to flee your homeland, then you know what it is to be in the wilderness.

The wilderness is a hard place to be. And yet, according to the Bible, the wilderness is also the place where God meets us. In fact, as much as the Jews longed for the return of God's presence in the Holy Temple, the wilderness was really where Israel knew God best. Wilderness was where Jacob wrestled with the angel and was given the name 'Israel.' Wilderness was where Moses met God in the burning bush. Wilderness was where the Hebrews, freed from Egypt, learned to trust in God and his ways, as they wandered for forty years. And the wilderness was where God's word came to them now.

"The word of God came to John in the wilderness," and it was for people who were in the wilderness. Indeed, John the Baptist's words this morning make sense only to those who understand that the place they are in is wild place, a place of crooked, treacherous paths, of high, unscalable mountains and dark unreachable valleys. For those who have been through such a place or who are there now, God's word comes as a light in the darkness, as a relief, for the Word enables us to be honest about our situation and name it for what it is—wilderness.

More than that, John proclaims a way out. In the wilderness, where only the shrieks of beasts are heard, there is also a voice announcing "prepare the way of the Lord." The Lord is coming, the voice declares, he is finding his way to us, because we can't find our way to him. "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."

We've heard those words so often, every December in church, that sometimes we miss how shocking they are. When they were first spoken by Isaiah, when Israel was still in exile in Babylon, they were an announcement of an amazing new thing: God was freeing Israel from captivity, letting them come home, preparing the path for them, "smoothing the way" for their return to the Promised Land. Spoken now, these words bear the same amazing message: God is coming to us, bulldozing a way through the wilderness of our lives, making a way to get to us because we couldn't get to him. God is coming and all of the obstacles between his coming to us and our going with him, are being taken care of by his mighty hand. Nothing is going to get in the way anymore.

For those who know what it means to wander in the wilderness, who feel that they are among those who sit in darkness, who feel locked out of God's promises, kept away from God's presence, from his blessing...for them, John's words are clearly good news. God won't abandon us; God is coming to us.

Yet, the good news doesn't end there. John's purpose is not just to prepare the way of the Lord, but to prepare people to receive Him. And so to everyone who will listen, he proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Too often those words—repent and sin—are wielded as weapons, used to frighten and diminish and set ourselves over others. But that's not how those words are used here. Here they are words of promise, of compassion, of mercy. For, in calling people to repentance, what John is offering is an invitation to start over, to begin again. That's what repentance means here—a chance to try again, to have a do-over. John is saying you have a chance to course-correct. It's not too late; it's never too late.

No matter what you've done in the past or what's been done to you, no matter how awful you've been, no matter how far you've gone, you can change, you can be forgiven, you can come home. You don't have to stay in the wilderness or stumble in the dark, bewildered. God is coming to be with us, coming into the wilderness of our lives, coming to rescue us, coming to bring healing and forgiveness and wholeness—coming to bring salvation.

That is what we hope for, what we are preparing for, during Advent—God's coming to us, not just as a baby at Christmas, but as our Savior, coming into our lives with power to save us. The Lord is coming. Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Amen.