

The Second Sunday of Advent
December 6, 2015
"Ringin' True"
By Mary Anne Biggs

Philippians 1:3-11 ~ Luke 3:1-6

There's an audacity to today's Gospel reading that's awfully easy to miss. But if you listen closely and read between the lines just a little, you'll hear a promise that at first is easy to overlook ... but ultimately it's as transformative as it is outrageous.

It all starts with Luke's partiality for situating his narrative amid the historical figures of the day. Luke, more than any of the other evangelists, writes self-consciously as a historian. Not, mind you, a historian of the twenty-first century, ... but rather of the first century. That's when you wrote history to make a point ... to teach a truth ... to draw people into the community narrative. And that's what Luke is doing here ... placing the beginning of the Christian story ... a story that now defines, encourages, and challenges his community of faith ... into the history of the world.

This is the third time Luke locates the drama he narrates amid the major actors of the world stage. The first time was the birth of John the Baptist "in the days of King Herod of Judah" (1:5). Next is the birth of Jesus that takes place under the rule of Emperor Augustus and while Quirinius was governor of Syria (2:1-3). And now, as John is about to start his ministry, Luke again places his story amid historical figures.

Why does Luke do this? Because, as I would have been scolded for saying when I was a child, he's got guts! He makes bold, that is, to say that these events ... about as small and insignificant as you can imagine ... deserve to be placed alongside the world-shaking people and events of the day. "Really," Luke dares his readers to ask ... what does the birth of two small children ... or the ministry of a misplaced prophet have to do with kings, emperors, and governors?" And his reply: "*Everything!*"

This is the way it is with the Gospel ... it seems so small it's easy to miss. More than that, it says that God's mercy comes disguised as human weakness ... two vulnerable children who will grow up to change the world ... an instrument of Roman torture turned into the means by which God reconciles the world unto God's own self. Yes, there is *always* something of the mustard-seed about the gospel ... it creeps 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.

So Luke begins his story by making the outrageous claim that God is at work in the weak and small ... in babies and barren women ... in unwed teenage mothers and wild-eyed prophets ... in itinerant preachers and executed criminals ... *these* are the folks who will change the world. And, to be quite honest, God's not done yet. Isn't that what we mean to say when we proclaim that "God is still speaking?" Aren't we able to recognize that God continues to work through unlikely characters today ... unpopular teens and out-of-work adults ... corporate executives

and stay-at-home parents ... underpaid secretaries and night-shift workers ... police officers and volunteer baseball coaches ... and even north woods preachers ... to announce the news of God's redemption? It's a promise, as I said, that's easy to miss, but when we hear it ... and even more ... when we see it taking place in our own lives ... it changes us along with the world.

Luke makes this outrageous claim that the "word of the Lord" comes to this nobody named John in that no-place called the wilderness and that this small and insignificant thing is more important than all the important people and events of the day.

But I think that Luke is going further than merely locating John amid the VIPs of the day ... he's also setting him against them. Previously Luke mentioned one or two of powerful. In these verses he mentions seven ... and as you read the list aloud it sounds like an ominous litany ... or a loud and insistent drumbeat marshalling the political, economic, and religious powers and principalities 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 ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...

And against all these stands paltry, insignificant John, son of Zechariah. Well, not quite ... against all these stands paltry, insignificant John, son of Zechariah ... *and* the Word of the Lord! The Word, as Isaiah said, that fills valleys and levels mountains, that straightens out what is crooked and smoothes over the rough places ... all in order to build a direct path by which God can bring us God's love and mercy.

These Seven are 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 was soon to come.

By the time Luke's community was reading these verses, none of those seven were still alive ... yet they are still telling the story of John and of Jesus ... the one John heralds. And today those proud and powerful men are just footnotes to the story of Christ ... the one sent to reveal the salvation of God to "all flesh."

I suspect that we at times also feel overlooked, insignificant, and small, surrounded by insurmountable problems, people, and challenges. Maybe it's not an Emperor that makes life miserable ... maybe it's just a difficult colleague or an unhappy marriage. Maybe it's not a Roman procurator that oppresses ... but instead a struggle with addiction to alcohol, drugs, or pornography. Maybe it's not mighty armies that threaten to destroy ... but instead feeling lost at school or work with no real friends. Maybe it's not rulers and priests that overwhelm ... but instead a struggle with depression, grief or loneliness.

Tragically, yet again there's been another seemingly random shooting in a public space. We have not yet found our footing after the carnage in Paris and the senseless shootings in Colorado in the past few weeks. To learn that 14 were killed and 17 were wounded at a holiday party is staggering ... or is it? I heard a BBC broadcaster, reporting from London, describe it as "just another day in the United States." But the front cover of New York's *Daily News* for Thursday

took a strong stance against how some politicians are reacting to the San Bernardino shooting with calls for prayer instead of tighter gun control laws.

The headline said, "God Isn't Fixing This." The cover went on to read, "As latest batch of innocent Americans are left lying in pools of blood, cowards who could truly end the gun scourge continue to hide behind meaningless platitudes." Please hear me, I am *not* suggesting that prayers are meaningless platitudes. I am praying fervently that this sickening and senseless gun violence will stop. I am praying fervently that weapons ... and ammunition that can go through protective vests and walls ... will cease falling so readily into public hands. I am praying fervently that God *will* fix this *through our efforts*. How long will we close our eyes to the tragically commonplace occurrence of gun violence ... and the continuing unwillingness of Congress to act in response?

But I am not without hope for Luke shares the gospel promise that these things, too, will pass ... that in the end they will be but a difficult and distant memory ... that over time they will become mere footnotes to a larger, grander, and more beautiful story of acceptance, grace, mercy, and life. The waiting can be hard, which is why Luke reminds his community *and* ours of this promise ... that is so easy to overlook ... but it's also big enough to save ... and audacious enough to transform.

Immersing himself in the wilderness, John the Baptist begins to speak words formed from beyond the schooled, spun, media-shaped, mind-set of the human metropolis. He will pay for his voice with his life. But as Emmanuel Levinas, the French Jewish philosopher wrote, "*To know God means to know what has to be done.*"

I find myself wanting to qualify that definition because I've had days, and more than a few, when Pilate's sense ... that truth is elusive and out of focus ... has been mine. But I've also had moments like John's, when I've known what I needed to do and how to proceed, come what may. And who can say how such clarity comes into us, if it comes from within us or whether it comes from beyond us, and who can say when such moments will arrive?

But that wilderness is a good place to look for such moments, many say. Mary Oliver, the Cape Cod poet, writes "*Everyday I'm still looking for God and I'm still finding him everywhere, in the dust*" And Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer poet, writes:

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

That John found his truth in the wilderness, and that people heard and responded to the truth he spoke there rings true.

That the Child of Bethlehem will be born among animals ... and that only shepherds who sleep in open fields among animals will first see this Child ... rings true. That Martin Luther one night saw the word of God in a fir tree with stars shining in its branches ... and heard that word so powerfully that he brought a tree into his house and placed candles on it so his family could hear it too ... rings true. That a rook, preening its feathers, can seize our senses and grant a brief respite from fear ... rings true. That all of this ... John the Baptist, the stable, the fields of Bethlehem, the telling of truth ... is awash with angels, rings true to me ... as true as dawn hovering at the edge of darkness.

May we pray?

God of all our searching, You are the answer to all our questions. Yet sometimes, we search and cannot find you. Give us the faith to trust in you even when we cannot see what you are doing. Give us the patience to wait for you even when we struggle to hope. Give us the peace to know you are the God who promises everything will work together for the good, because we know you always keep your promises through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.