

‘God Trespassing’

Sermon Luke 3:1-6

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent

December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024

The first few lines of today’s Scripture lesson may sound boring to us. ‘In the fifteenth year 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 the God came to John.’

Why does Luke, the author of today’s gospel lesson, bother with all this detailed historic information? Well, he obviously likes history. And he makes it clear that the story of Jesus Christ is not just some myth, but that God’s son is sent into this world and into quite concrete political circumstances. Luke tells the story of Jesus Christ as a story literally down to earth – and it’s quite a gritty story.

But in those first verses of today’s lesson, Luke also hints at a juicy story of power and intrigue that may be lost on us today, but that his audience understood quite well. First of all, it becomes very clear that the Romans rule over the Jewish territories of Judea and Galilee – all those territories bordering the Jordan River. There is Emperor Tiberius with his undisputed power in Rome, but then there are those depending on the Emperor’s favor: Pontius Pilate, the brutal governor. Herod and Philip, pliable puppet kings, who nevertheless clash with Pilate on a regular basis over matters of rule and power. Lysanias, another rather obscure ruler in that region and vassal of Rome, who, spoiler alert, is executed as a traitor in the year 33 by Mark Anthony because Cleopatra has an eye on Lysanias’ territories. Annas and Caiaphas, who as high priests nominally have authority in all religious and spiritual matters, but who also are under the Emperor’s thumb: the Emperor screens and approves all candidates for the office of high priest.

To summarize, the Romans have control over the region, be it directly or indirectly.

And those with even a shred of power in those regions fight tooth and nails to hang on to this power, often with each other, and often at the expense of their subjects. Some things never change...

Those first lines of today's gospel lesson describe a highly volatile and tense political situation. Boring? Definitely not. This setup alone could be developed as a suspenseful tale in the style of 'Game of Thrones'.

So in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius when all those other folks were ruling their prospective realms along the River Jordan, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness, we read. God's word comes to a hermit, a religious nut, the son of a minor priest, a nobody, really. Luke juxtaposes all the high and mighty political rulers of the day with this nobody.

Of course this gives us a clue about God's agenda: God's power is not to be found in gilded halls or luxuriously equipped offices. God is not defined by cunning power plays and violence. God's power is much more subtle and pervasive. God's instruments are those who are far from the centers of worldly power: yes, there is John. But then there is Mary, a young and obscure woman who is chosen to give birth to the Son of God. There is Jesus himself, a carpenter and wandering teacher proclaiming a peaceful realm of God on earth through word and deed. And there have been countless others throughout history, bringing the word and the kingdom of God about through acts of mercy and justice and charity. We just lost one of these people: Janet, who with gentle strength and passion shared the good news of Jesus Christ and his justice and peace with all whom she encountered.

In John as in her and so many others, God's strange power breaks into this world, which is dominated by much different powers.

Well, in the case of John the Baptist, God's power actually is not quite so subtle, but rather invasive. In today's gospel, we read, 'and John went into all the region around the Jordan'; in other words, he trespasses on the territories of Abilene and Judea and Galilee, which all border on the River Jordan, territories claimed by governors and kings and rulers, the territories claimed by Rome. And through John, God steps right into the wilderness of the messy and volatile power plays of the day. Can you sense how the plot thickens here?

Listen to John's message in this context: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.' Prepare the way of *the Lord* – someone who is above Cesar and all his charges. This is an open attack on the worldly powers of the day, this is an open attack on Rome. And the rest of John's message, taken right out of an older prophecy from the Book of Isaiah, reinforces God's preposterous claim: 'Make the Lord's 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.'

This is radical, dangerous talk. And this just as a reminder, we all know what happens to John eventually, right? John's message is an urgent appeal to all those who listen – be it the folks along the banks of the River Jordan or us here today on the North Fork – to not just passively wait for the Lord who is to come, but to take action as we anticipate his coming. Make his paths straight. And how do we do that? By filling every valley, by making the mountains and the hills low and the crooked straight and the rough ways smooth.

We are to strive for justice and equality, we are to pay attention to all that is wrong in a world; a world where the top 1% own 50% of all wealth on this planet – at the expense of the poor and the environment. We are encouraged to open our eyes to the fact that the mountains tend to get higher and the valleys lower and lower, well, at least in a figurative way when we think about the gap between rich and poor. We are called to do our part in questioning the status quo of this world and to act more justly ourselves. For *all* flesh is to see the salvation of God, and not just a privileged few. That's the ultimate vision of God, that's the ultimate goal.

I think it's quite clear that John's message – God's message – doesn't sit too well with the powers of the day – or any worldly power for that matter. It questions their status and privilege. John's message is conspicuously absent from today's politics, even though many in power claim to have Christian values.

But it also makes *all* who listen to him uncomfortable, not just those in powerful positions. Because God's vision requires a general turnaround, a change of ways, or repentance, to use the church-y expression. John appeals to his listeners throughout time and space to change their ways from complicity or complacency or resignation toward the vision of what God's realm on earth could and should be – and to actively live into that vision, that hope. To not give up and give into what seems inevitable and unchangeable.

In that sense, God - through John - isn't only trespassing on the territories of the rulers of his day. God also steps right into our experience, and on our toes, making us uncomfortable, making us think, making us re-think our ways. And I don't think that's a bad thing, considering where we are at in this world and what powers are determining our fate and the fate of the planet.

John's message reminds us of God's subtle and subversive power – a power of love, a power of grace, a power that says 'yes' to life in all its forms. It is the power we see in a newborn child in a manger, a power that softens our hearts and makes us believe that new beginnings are possible. John reminds us that you and I are offered this power - that we can use it, and prepare the way of the Lord wherever we are and wherever we go. Amen