

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE WILDERNESS DOESN'T STAY IN THE WILDERNESS

Advent 2-C December 9, 2018

Luke 3:1-6

This week is a contrast from last Sunday, when we heard from the 20th chapter of Luke's gospel, where Jesus spoke to his disciples about signs and warnings: frightening events and scary times that would ultimately be the harbinger of hope. Jesus told his friends: "Raise up your heads; for your salvation is drawing near."

Today, we have a different herald of hope, as we jump toward the beginning of Luke to hear about John the Baptizer. Our evangelist, who promised an orderly account for us (at the start of this gospel), is setting the scene historically, by identifying the leaders of the day. "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..."

It seems like an orderly account alright; perhaps a lot more detail than we had asked for. But this gospel is about showing us how the pieces fit together—how, at the right time, while all these important people are about their business of ruling and governing the political and spiritual realms, the word of God comes, not to Rome, not to Jerusalem, but to a young man who has essentially made his home away from the power centers and lives—in the wilderness. John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, is the one to whom the word of God comes. That word sends him forth into a ministry of proclamation and baptism as John tells people to turn their lives around and turn toward God, thus preparing the way for the Even Greater One who is to come. It hardly sounds like the best idea for a publicity campaign; yet it is brilliant. For it is into what would appear to be one of the most God-forsaken places that the word of God comes.

For us today, it makes sense because we know that the One to come will be born in the least-likely setting for a coming Messiah, and his ministry will culminate in what looks to most to be defeat; only to have the lid blown off (or, at least, the stone rolled away)!

To have this "herald" appearing from the wilderness to preach and teach and baptize and convert doesn't look like a plan for success; yet it is the beginning of the surprise plot for the story of God's surprising love.

Jesus isn't born into the trappings of royalty; yet he is tied to the greatest king of his own people (David)—and as his story becomes known, people will call him King of kings and Lord of lords.

Contrast this with our culture today, where famous people worry about keeping their name on top of buildings, headlines, marquees, and a very-short news cycle. With so much information and around the clock news, it takes a lot of effort to keep your name in people's memories. After all, when people stop talking about you, you fade into irrelevance. (Kind of like those people about whom we would know little or nothing, had it not been for Luke's "orderly account.")

We can remember a recent advertising campaign for a city in the desert. Well-known for gambling and entertaining, it nonetheless tries to present itself as a place where you can get lost in the crowds, unnoticed in the desert. "What happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas," it proudly boasts. Which is at least mildly amusing, because it's one of the places where people try to make a name for themselves.

In contrast, this Second Sunday of Advent prepares us by telling us that what happened in the desert *couldn't* remain there: it was the beginning of what Episcopal Presiding Bishop Michael Curry likes to call "The Jesus Movement." The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. And that was *the beginning* of the Good News. There's a lot more of a story that is unfolding. And, according to the One for whom John prepared the way, the real story has our names written all over it. Amen.