

Cry Out
Luke 3.1-6
Advent 2C
December 6, 2015
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We pay attention to about half of the verses read in today's Gospel text. If we have a basic familiarity with Christian scripture or the music of Handel's *Messiah*, then we recognize the words of Isaiah quoted by John the Baptist. Maybe we catch mention of Pontius Pilate and Zechariah and think "Yep. Old names. Bible Story." But most of the first two verses in Luke 3 are skipped over as peripheral details that don't matter for the meat of the passage. What matters is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. And yet, it's those first two verses that set the stage for everything Luke wants us to know.

When certain stories begin with a name and place, the writer is inviting you to enter the story at a specific point, and the naming allows you to do all of the introductory work yourself. Because these names in Luke aren't part of our own present-day stories, the effect is lost on us. But if someone begins with:

In the U.S. territory of Hawaii, on the morning of December 7, 1941, as hundreds of airplanes appeared in the sky...we know that war is coming.

Or on December 26, 2004, along the Indian Ocean, the waters rose in Indonesia...we know that devastation is next.

On Wednesday, December 2, 2015, in San Bernardino, California...we're still making our way through that one, aren't we?

Sometimes we don't need much information at all to access our memories in the middle of a story. Hitler, the assassination of JFK, the day the levees failed. The story that follows makes sense because of the details that precede it.

The Gospel writer is inviting his readers to locate John in a certain time and place when real events were transpiring around them all. "Luke begins by situating the time period in which Jesus lived, starting with the most powerful, Emperor Tiberius, to different local and religious figures. Yet it was not until the end of the list...that God spoke," and God did not speak to "the proponent of the military industrial complex, Tiberius who expanded the Roman Empire with force, nor Pontius Pilate who was the State head of

Rome in Judea. [Nor did God speak to] the Jewish Political leader, Herod, who was more concerned with his own politics than practicing the Jewish faith [or to] those who lived as high priests.”¹

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, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

In the midst of power and oppression, empire and domination, God found a listener who was waiting for God. Against all odds, God spoke to a wildly awake man in the distant desert who believed the world was not as it should be. While the powers of empire were oppressing; while the deck was stacked; while the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, the word of God came to John.

By giving us names and places, Luke wants us to know that this scene is real and set in history. Perhaps more importantly, Luke also wants us to know that God’s voice will not be conflated with the voices of power. God’s voice will be crying out in ways we do not expect.

³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵Every 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; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

We are living in confusing times. We know of great violence and threats of violence. We are told by the 24-hour news cycle to be vigilant and greatly afraid. Depending on which 24-hour news cycle we access, we are told whom to fear. All tell us to fear neighbors who disagree with us and see them as the enemy. Fear the Right, fear the Left, fear the Muslim, fear the stranger, be suspicious, be prepared. They make their wealth on our fear, and we continue to turn the channel on, check the web page, share the link.

On Friday, a second generation fundamentalist president at a Christian college in Virginia addressed the student body with the offer of free concealed-carry courses on

¹ Timothy Wotring, <http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/wild-listening-politics-scripture-luke-31-6/>

the University campus. He said, "I've always thought that if more good people had concealed-carry permits, then we could end those Muslims before they walked in... Let's teach them a lesson if they ever show up here."²

Jerry Falwell, Jr., has a large microphone in front of his voice, so *The Washington Post* has already reported his speech and Twitter has responded feverishly. These are the words of a person of faith, a Christian educator, spoken to a Christian student body about how to respond to the fear and violence and tragedy in our world today. Rather than use my smaller microphone respond to the exact details of his speech, I just have a question about the essence of his comments. Is this the best we can imagine?

As people of faith, as followers of Jesus, as believers in the kingdom of God, as students of scripture, as practitioners of prayer, is the very best response we have to muster to the great fear and confusion of our world...just get 'em first? Above all else, look out for yourself. Get them before they can get you. That's the voice with which Christians are to cry out? No, that is the voice coming from Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee.

My brothers and sisters, where are we listening for the voice of God to cry out? Perhaps there are too many voices at too many microphones on too many screens for us to hear the voice of God. Maybe there are some news sources and forms of media input that we need to silence. Maybe there are too many powers and principalities whispering to us of how the world should be. Maybe we have forgotten who we are if our imaginations grow so dull we only know the language of self-preservation and fighting back. Surely we have not altogether given up on Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace!

Christians are gathered in places of worship this morning across our country, just as we are. Like us, they are in the season of waiting for the birth of the Christ child. Over the next three weeks, we will hear the angels say, "Do not fear! I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people!" We will remind each other of our truth, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it." If we want to hear the voice of God, we must position ourselves more like John and less like Tiberius. Awake, listening, believing fully that God is at work in our world in ways we have yet to fully imagine.

And when we feel that is an impossible task, we must pray with Pastor Martha Spong:

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/05/liberty-university-president-if-more-good-people-had-concealed-guns-we-could-end-those-muslims/>

Each Advent I think
surely next year peace
won't still seem like
a far away impossible.

I look back now
to times of war
and they seem logical;
although I revile them,

I can understand them.
A map of allies,
an axis of powers,
a reason to fight,

purported at least.
Disagree with it
I might; I did.
But comprehend? Yes.

Now we live in the midst
of the incomprehensible:
never-ending violence.
We are all someone's enemy.

A voice said "Preach!"
And I said,
"What will I preach?"
What can I?

Preach peace.
Preach peace
over everyday terror
and murderous prejudice.

Preach peace
over control fantasies
and casual violence
and the lies of fear.

Call it far away,
but not impossible.
Then work together
to make it so,

in Jesus' name. Amen.