

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea...” and so on and so on. The list of historical names can easily just march right past our attention, can’t they? Some may stand out for a moment. Pontius, we remember is the governor who will execute Jesus and we might catch the name Herod. This is not Herod the Great, who slaughtered all the first-born male children of Bethlehem, but his son, Herod Antipas, who will murder John the Baptizer.

But who are these other people and why does Luke take such pains to list all seven and their titles before we even hear of John? And why does the lectionary give us this reading for the Second Sunday of Advent, the day that we light the “peace” candle?

The author of Luke’s Gospel has empire on the mind and consistently presents Jesus as a person who overturns the order of the world. Jesus, for Luke, represents God’s absolute, unbounded grace as a model for discipleship. Consequently, Luke needs to present the context of Empire before introducing us to John, the fore-runner.

Navigating the Roman Empire in first century Judea was complex. Roman citizens were expected to worship Emperor Tiberius, whose political inability, poor judgment and jealousy led Rome into a dark age of political purges, murder and terror. Pontius Pilate was a sadistic bureaucrat charged with keeping law and order by any means necessary, who had sole authority for ordering executions, a method he used with alarming regularity.

Herod and his brother Philip each ruled a quarter of Judea, though they were not Jews. Luke does not mention the third brother, Archelaus, who ruled over a huge part of Judea as well as Samaria. Matthew’s Gospel gives us reason to assume that Archelaus was every bit as nasty a piece of work as his father. Lysanias, the fourth ruler, was an obscure Roman official in charge of a problematic region of Judea. Annas, a former temple official, and his son-in-law,

Caiaphas were appointed by the Romans to be members of the Sanhedrin, the religious authorities who will later insist on Jesus' execution.

You can see that the world Luke is evoking is a fear-filled world characterized by power-hungry politicians, and extremists advocating violence in the name of religion. In the face of all that empire-building, death and fear, comes the powerless, insignificant John, the unlikely son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Well, that's not exactly right, is it? In the face of all that empire-building, death and fear comes the powerless, insignificant John. And the Word of God.

Luke sets the scene by reminding the listener of the impressive powers of empire filling them with fear so that he can introduce the solution—the path to peace announced by John, an unkempt wildman whose only real power is God's word. But this word is God's promise of peace; of God's shalom, which is so much more than just an end to war and hostility. God's shalom is wholeness, harmony and fullness of life. That is the salvation of God that all flesh shall see.

The powers of empire were – and *are still* – at work filling the world we live in with worry and fear and divisiveness. But here is the evidence of God's new realm. God spoke the word not to the palace but to the desert. Not to those in obvious positions of power, but to a man, John, who engaged in abnormal behavior by living outside structured society in a world of chaos and disorder.

You see, the people and places and circumstances that the world considers most important are not always the people and places and circumstances that God chooses to straighten crooked roads and make rough places smooth. It seems that God has a certain affection for unrehearsed people and unexpected places and seemingly insignificant circumstances. I suppose these are the people more likely to be aware of their dependence on God and not on their own power.

So when we hear John the Baptizer urging us to prepare the way of the Lord, we need to be clear: you and I are not intended to save all of humanity. At least, not by ourselves. You and I are not going to make all paths straight. But we can make some paths straight. You and I are the unrehearsed people living in unexpected places under what may seem to be insignificant circumstances. We

have only our willingness to give ourselves to God. Well, that's not exactly right, is it? All we have is our willingness to give ourselves to God. And we have the Word of God.

Advent is a season of preparation. From one perspective, Advent is preparation for in the total in-breaking of God's shalom and that can seem overwhelming. From a more mundane perspective, Advent is preparation for parties and dinners, family and guests, and all that comes around this time of year. But those are the very unlikely places where God will tap the shoulders of the unrehearsed to make rough circumstances a bit smoother.

There are rough ways this time of year, aren't there? Most of what comes is joyful. But for some, Advent is a time of loneliness, of anxiety or depression, or even outright conflict. Often, the joy and the pain are mixed. We may not be rehearsed, but we can be prepared to watch for opportunities to bring a little peace into circumstances where peace would not otherwise be present.

There are, of course, enormous issues that need our attention. We seem to lack sufficient capacity for civil dialogue about racism or guns. We need to find a way to deal both justly and fairly with people who use religion as an excuse to murder. These are just some of the circumstances that can make us feel like we are surrounded by insurmountable problems. There is a role for those in power that requires our participation, even if these are not the challenges that you and I can solve by ourselves. Crooked roads will be straight and rough places smooth. And all, whether powerful or powerless, will see the salvation of God together.

Even so, you and I are not overlooked, insignificant and small in God's work of bringing God's realm to light. We prepare by watching in the desolate places for the Word waiting to blossom with meaning and new life. Rather than living under a brutal Emperor who makes lives miserable, maybe you or someone you know is struggling with family or financial difficulties. Rather than trying to survive with a cruel Roman procurator standing on your neck, maybe you or someone you know is laboring with grief, health concerns or addiction. Rather than staggering under the oppression of power hungry governors, maybe it is feeling trapped in loneliness and isolation. Rather than fighting to keep your faith alive

under church leadership that is more focused on their own social status, perhaps it is feeling a little overwhelmed with the busyness or depression that can often arise during Advent and Christmas.

Whatever the desert may be, Luke's gospel promises that the valleys of despair will be eased into plains and that mountains of trouble will be made low. And all people will see God's larger and more beautiful story of acceptance, grace and mercy. You have been given that word and that means you can help to bring God's peace.

Take some inspiration from Zechariah. He is an old man who has been deaf and mute for the past nine months. The imposed silence has forced him to contemplate his life—his faithful service to God as a priest and his faithful love for Elizabeth, his wife. For decades, he has been praying for God's shalom for all the people and for his own family. He has been waiting and watching for God's shalom and now with the unanticipated birth of a son, Zechariah burst from the silence to sing. His hymn begins with praise to God: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel..." And then he turns and sings to his child.

Now I realize that each of us had a different relationship with their fathers. But regardless of your relationship with your actual father, imagine for a moment, a father figure who loves you as deeply as Zechariah loved John. A father figure who loves you in all your eccentricities, all your limitations and all your gifts. When you wonder how you will bring peace to your interactions with the people in your immediate surroundings this Advent, bring this loving Zechariah-figure to mind and imagine if he were to sing to you: "And *you*, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."

And when the powers of empire threaten to overtake you, be reassured that God's reign of peace is at hand. The light is coming. Take strength from Zechariah's reminder, and radiate it for the people and for your families: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."