

The Spirit of Peace

Luke 3:1-6
December 6, 2021

First Presbyterian Church
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Last Christmas, a woman came to (the ministry program) Friend to Friend in the middle of the night. She was homeless, living on the street, mentally ill, addicted and high. She came through the door crying, barefoot and with torn clothes. She had been assaulted and beaten – it was cold and rainy and she had nowhere to go. She had seen the light of the clubhouse, knew of its reputation, and taken a chance that she would find help. The volunteers and clients who were there found her a change of clothes, heavy socks, some old tennis shoes, a new jacket and blanket, food and first aid. She finally stopped crying, and said – much to everyone’s surprise – “This is such a peaceful place. God must be here with us tonight!”¹ That was the scene as described by Amanda May in her piece titled “The Wild Man and the Drunkard” – a scene in which God breaks through the chaos with the Spirit of Peace.

Advent is all about God breaking through the chaos of our lives – our world – and bringing the Spirit of Peace to dark and uncertain times. We see that in today’s New Testament lesson where Luke describes a scene quite similar to that of the woman at Friend-to-Friend ministries, a woman assaulted and beaten, addicted and high, mentally ill and homeless. Instead of listing such examples of the brutality, debauchery, illness and desperation he saw all around him, Luke describes it with a bit of name dropping, quite a bit of name dropping.

Luke describes it as “... the 15th 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....” That’s how Luke describes things since everyone knew that Tiberius, Pilate and Herod were notorious for their cruelties, their treacheries and their callous disregard for others.

For instance, Tiberius was despised and mistrusted by his own political cronies. He used made-up charges of treason against his political opponents and put them on trial in order to keep them in line. Pilate was known for playing both ends against the middle – meaning that he was cheating his Roman superiors and abusing his Judean subjects, while pretending to “make nice” with both of them.

¹ Amanda G.R. May, “The wild man and the drunkard,” December 12, 2004, St. Dunstan’s Episcopal Church Web Site, stdunstans.org. Reprinted by permission of Rev. Amanda Rutherford May, Executive Director of Episcopal Community Services in San Diego, ecscalifornia.org.

Herod, meanwhile, was insanely paranoid. He actually had three of his own sons executed, along with his wives, because he thought they might be plotting against him. And then there are the religious leaders that Luke mentions. Annas, the Temple high priest, was really just a sell-out who spent more time helping Roman than he did helping his own people. And Caiaphas was the high priest who would later arrest and condemn Jesus.

“In the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius” and all of this brutality and brokenness that it brought, “the word of God came...,” the word of God came to John the Baptizer in the wilderness. God’s word did not come to those of political power, financial wealth or social standing and popularity. It came to John; God spoke through John.

How does God speak today? Where is the word of God encountered today? Where do we see it breaking through? We certainly have a lot of words breaking through all around us all the time, but how many of them are the word of God? How many people are ever listening for God’s word these days? How often are we responding faithfully to God’s word? And how often are we ignoring it or avoiding it, actively or passively. How often does God reach out to us and we just pass right by, move on to the next thing on our to-do list, the place we need to be next. Things to think about, right? In what ways do we actively avoid encountering God’s word, maybe by missing a Sunday at church, or not showing up prepared to meet God here, in the midst of our current situation, whether that be troubled or joyful?

Of course, church is only one place where God’s word breaks through to us.

In quoting the Prophet Isaiah, Luke points to several other places where we can and do encounter the word of God. “Prepare the way of the Lord,” he says, “make his 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.

All those weird paths we end up on in life, the low valleys we meet, the mountain of trouble we face, the crooked things we see, the rough times we struggle with – all of these are places in life where we can and do encounter the word of God, if we’re listening and paying attention.

When Luke says, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” that’s our invitation to examine our lives, our daily schedules, our habits and practices, our obsessions and fantasies – examine ourselves for anything that might be crowding God out. And believe me, anyone living in this day-and-age has lots of things crowding God out. Just give it some thought this week – or even today! You’ll find something in your life getting between you and God.

Give it some thought and then pick one thing, pick at least one thing that’s crowding out God in your life. Can you think of something?

Pray about it. Ask God what to do about it. Listen for the word that God has for you – a word of caution or rebuke, a word of encouragement or direction, a glimmer of light breaking through the darkness, leading you closer to God.

God's desire is to set things straight in this world and to smooth things out for his faithful ones. "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."

That is the assurance we have in this time of Advent, this time of anticipation and waiting, anticipation and waiting for God to break through to us – to you – and break through to this wayward world we live in.

So let us set aside some time this Advent to actively encounter the word of God – to lay ahold of some scripture in whatever way you can – so that the word of God might enter into you and your life, and through us, into this world that is in such need of the hope, peace, joy and love of Jesus. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of the prophets, into the wilderness you sent your messenger to prepare for the coming of your Son. In every age, your Word has called your people from death to life, and from darkness into light.

In our own day, you have raised up voices who call us to turn and mend our ways. Open our hearts to your good news, help us to repent and make us ready to welcome the Christ.

We know, O God, that you are our strength and our hope. So we look to your presence in our lives for guidance and blessing. Come to us now through the gift of this season of wonder and waiting, come to us in the Spirit Jesus Christ, as together we raise our eyes to heaven and our voice in song, praying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**