

God's Word in the Real World
Luke 3:1-6
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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, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as 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.
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." '

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I remember when I was in Sunday school as a kid and we would have to read the Bible out loud. We would go around in a circle, and everyone would read a verse.

If you were quick, you could scan the room and figure out which verse you were going to be yours. It was the verses with the names in them that made people want to switch seats so that they could avoid the embarrassment when it came time for them to read. I had a great Sunday school teacher – but it got to the point where Chris would just tell us to skip over the verses with a bunch of names because she got tired of seeing the class wrestle each other so we wouldn't have to read them.

It is important for Luke that this passage starts out with a bunch of names. You're probably familiar with some of the names we just heard, but maybe not all of them.

Tiberious was the emperor of Rome.
Pilate was the governor – technically the procurator – of Judea. A Roman appointee to look after Roman interests in the part of the world where Jesus was born.

Herod and Philip were the sons of Herod the Great (you remember him from the story of the three wise men). And Lysanias was the ruler of the region of Abiline.

These were men who were something like vassal kings – kings with no real power within the Roman system, but who could still make life miserable for the citizens that lived within their territory. Essentially, Herod, Philip, and Lysanias divvied up the larger kingdom of Herod the Great after his death.

The author of Luke's gospel wanted to make sure to include all of these names in order to paint a picture. If you were someone who was alive around the time Luke's gospel was first told, you would want to skip over all of these names, too, but not because you couldn't pronounce them. You would want to skip over these names because they would remind you of the fact that the world you lived in was unfair, and violent, and lacking in mercy.

Luke tells the story this way because he wants us to know that it is into this reality that Jesus was born.

Sometimes I think we allow our Anglicanized Christmas carols to paint a gauzy picture of what life was like in first century Palestine.

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie...

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan...

While shepherds watched their flocks by night all seated on the ground...

But the town of Bethlehem was only still because the people there were afraid of what the Roman authorities might do to them if they spoke up. And the wind there might have been frosty, but not because of the cold. And if it weren't for the third-shift shepherd crew on the outskirts of town, we might have missed the miracle of Jesus' birth because it seemed that everyone else was too preoccupied to notice.

One of the things I think we forget is that God did not wait for a perfect and non-threatening and receptive moment to send Jesus into our world – but that God acted when it seemed that hope was lost. That peace was a myth. That joy was a memory. That love had been defeated.

So it was that in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod and Philip and Lysanias were kings, and during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas the word of God came –

not to them...not to those who represented and tried to define reality –
but to John.

To a wilderness preacher – who was the son of a priest named Zechariah.

Now, there is no question that when the word of God comes crashing into your reality it changes your life. Especially if that word causes you to work for change is that is hard to come by – or unpopular – or both. But this is where we can learn something from John's story. Because when the word came to John, God didn't ask him to save the world...but to prepare the way for the one who would.

It's hard enough, sometimes, to believe that things might be different; that there is a future hope beyond the reality we can see. It's even harder when you feel the pressure to be the one responsible for ushering in that future.

But that's not our calling. Securing the future is way over our pay-grade. John's part of the story; our part in the story is about preparation – about trusting our work and our lives to a future that is promised by the God who sent us his only son.

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The word of God comes in the real world.

In Ghana, Africa, in the midst of a struggle for independence from the British empire, in a culture where fertility was equated with faithfulness and worth, in a time when women could not be ordained in the church,
the word of God came to Mercy Oduyoye.

After she was married, Mercy Oduyoye discovered that she could not have children of her own. A childless woman in Africa, she was shunned by her village and her family. But the word of God came. In unheard of fashion, Mercy went to university in Ghana, then to Cambridge. She has committed her life to educating and empowering women – opening a clinic specializing in AIDS education for women who seldom have a voice. Mercy had taught at Harvard University and Union Theological Seminary – her story has changed lives.

Mercy wasn't called to save the world – but to prepare the way for the one who will.

The word of God comes in the real world.

In Charlotte, North Carolina, at a time when half of our public schools are segregated by race (meaning at least 80% of the student population is the same race), and a third of all schools are segregated by poverty; where a child's school placement has become a reliable predictor of their economic future and a path toward self-sufficiency or truancy and crime,
the word of God came to Amy Hawn Nelson

I'm not sure Amy would describe her work through that lens, but I am confident God is involved. Amy grew up in Charlotte and graduated from South Mecklenburg High School in 1997 at which time Charlotte's schools were radically less segregated. Her education, work, and life are centered around a question that she poses on a regular basis: "are we a community where we are OK having segregated schools?" As an educational researcher, over the past few years, Amy has been teaching, speaking and consulting with churches, groups, the School Board and other decision makers – sharing data, painting a picture of how diverse schools benefit ALL children who attend.

Amy is not called to save the world, but to prepare the way for the one who will.

The word of God comes in the real world.

In the midst of the 2008 economic meltdown, when fear about the future threatened to crowd out hope, and anxiety about our own lives competed for the time we spent improving the lives of others,

the word of God came to a young investment banker with a little more time on her hands.

Trusting her call, she transitioned from the world of finance to the pursuit of teaching. As she moved across the country to complete a Teach for America program, the word of God came – quite literally – in a commitment from one of her mentors...another woman from our church...to pray for her and continually remind her in phone calls and through notes of God's promise in Jeremiah 29: *Surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

Now a director of a non-profit committed to intervening in the lives of the 70% of economically disadvantaged 3rd – 8th graders who score below standard in math, she is leading a team of staff and volunteers to make an impact.

She is not called to save the world, but to prepare the way for the one who will.
The word of God comes in the real world.

Today we lit the candle of Peace.

I remember three years ago as we lit this candle, our nation was still raw from the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. This week we are trying to make sense of a tragedy in San Bernardino, California...and in our own city, a triple homicide in West Charlotte.

Like you, I am tired of living in the presence of violence. I am tired of having to be constantly aware of threats and vigilant about security.

I wish our reality was different.

But I also know that today we have heard the word.

And that as God's people, chosen and beloved, we live in service to a God who strengthens the broken-hearted, gives rest to the weary, and hope to the hopeless.

And I know that while you and I are not called to save the world, we are called to prepare the way for the one who will.

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Let us pray: For peace, O Lord, we pray. And that by your word, you would make us instruments. In ways large and small – by committing ourselves to treating all those we meet with a dignity that comes from belonging to you. Amen.