

Who's Not Who
Luke 3:1-6
December 6, 2015
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

In the seventh year of Barack Obama, president of the United States, when Rick Snyder was governor of Michigan, and Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow were senators, when Fred Upton was congressman, when Gradye Parsons was the stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church USA and Heath Rada was the Moderator, (when Paul Gobble was president of the Richland Village Council), then Word of God came to . . .

That's the way Luke starts this part of the story, scholars say this is Luke's way of locating the story of Jesus in our history, emphasizing the historical legitimacy of Jesus' life. So Luke gets the whole cast of characters out and places them on the stage: there's Tiberius, the emperor in Rome, King Herod the tetrarch in Galilee, Pilate who was the prefect, and Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, then the word of God came to . . . none of them.

None of them.

You might expect that God would speak to a person of *power* but instead he speaks to someone nobody knew. A stranger, and not just a stranger, but someone so far away from the centers of power that no one even knew where he lived. John was out in the wilderness. Not in Rome or Athens, not in Alexandria or Jerusalem, but in the negative space, those empty stretches in the holy land where one had to rely on their survival instinct because there weren't others around. He was not a man of power and influence; he was just this man named John.

Like his kinsman, Jesus, John's birth had been a surprise. His mother Elizabeth and his father Zechariah had begun to despair of ever having children for they were getting on in years. But then Zechariah, a priest, who was serving in the temple in Jerusalem entered into the Holy of Holies in the Temple. That had been the place where they had kept the Ark of the Covenant before that first temple had been destroyed (you may remember we talked a great deal about that this summer). The priest who would enter was chosen by lot. In their minds it was dangerous to be exposed to the presence of God. The priest who was so chosen would go in by himself, with a rope tied around his ankle, so if he happened to see God and was struck dead by the sight, the others could pull him out without endangering themselves. But when Zechariah entered the Holy of Holies he encountered not God, but the angel Gabriel, who appeared to him and told him that he and Elizabeth would have a son and "*he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*" You can imagine how Zechariah must have responded, *who are we to have a son like that?* And so he was born and he was given the name John, as the angel had foretold, and that's the last we hear of him until he comes preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as we just read this morning, and this nobody from nowhere changes the world.

And I think that is Luke's point. Throughout his gospel, Luke emphasizes that it is God's pattern to take what is small and unnoticed in the eyes of the world and use that very thing, that very person, to change the world. An unknown priest, and older childless woman, a small town carpenter, an unwed young woman expecting a baby, a bunch of shepherds on a hillside. It's these people that God chooses to speak to, to do wonderful things, not Caesar, not Herod, not Pilate, not the high priest.

And isn't that *still* the way it is?

I've been thinking about that a lot this week. It's been a frustrating disturbing week with the news filled with the tragedy in San Bernardino (and right on the heels of the shooting in Colorado) Lots of talking heads are on TV speculating about the people who were the shooters, what their motives were, what role religion played in their actions. And people on TV, in opinion pages, possibly you and definitely me, are wondering why the powerful people don't **do** something about it. Surely there's *something* they can do, right? Something.

Of course, it is the question of *what* that something should be that has people divided and so we cease to do anything.

Many say we should pass tougher gun laws, while others say we should improve mental health care or at least keep better track of those who pose a danger like do a better job identifying people who might do such things, have a more powerful and effective police force...

The debate doesn't lack for ideas but those having the debate lack the ability to come to a consensus. And these are the powerful people of *our* day. We ask, "*Why don't those in Washington and Lansing and the centers of power do something instead of just fighting with each other and letting things like this happen over and over again?*"

But then I read this passage—there was Caesar and Herod and Pilate and Philip and Annas and Caiaphas, and the word of God came to none of them, no one on the Who's Who list. And I wonder, why should we expect it to be any different today? Who's going to change the world for us, today? Who is God going to use?

Will he use the leaders? Probably somewhat: we've had effective leaders and I trust we'll continue to have strong leadership in the world whether they be governmental officials or religious leaders like the Pope.

But this moment isn't about them.

It's about someone whom the world sees as insignificant—a first grade teacher, a clerk in a store, a mom who is too busy, a retired senior who is looking for some peace, an overworked underpaid nurse, even a small town preacher. The way Luke tells this story tells us that God uses not the people in places of obvious power, not the people on the Who's Who list, but the other people, the people like you and me. When Obama was president and Snyder was governor and Levin was senator, the word of God came to someone in Richland, or Plainwell or Comstock or Kalamazoo or Hickory Corners—places the world probably sees not too different from John's wilderness.

It's us. It's you and me that God will use to change the world. We are the ones called like John to announce the coming of the Lord, to proclaim the redemption of the world.

That's crazy right? What can we do? We can't do enough to change the world.

We can. We just don't know it.

There's an old story from the Muslim Sufi tradition about the wise and humble man who was granted one wish by God. The man thought for a bit and then asked God for the ability to do good to everyone he met but then--to keep himself humble—he asked that he never realize the good he was doing. And God granted his wish. And then, after thinking about it for a while, God thought that this was such a

good idea that he would grant the same wish to everyone. And so he did.¹

It is us, and people just like us, and people who *aren't* much like us; we are all part of the kingdom of God, and we all are charged with the responsibility to bring that kingdom into this world. It is when you love the child or encourage the teenager or listen to the senior, it is when you make this place a place where everyone feels welcome and at home and safe. It is when you encounter a person of another faith and you respond in respect and curiosity and acceptance and not in fear. It is when we remember that Jesus tells us not to close ourselves off from the world, to not be not afraid, because he is with us.

And yes, the best way we prepare to bring the kingdom into the world, prepare the way of the lord is first, through **prayer**.

Prayer also made it into the headlines this week. Did you see it? The New York Daily News front page headline read: God is Not Fixing This. The editors of the paper were taking some of our political leaders to task, leaders who, in the face of events like this, over and over again will say that they are keeping the families and friends of the victims in their prayers, but they are not doing anything about it. The gist of the argument was not so much an indictment of prayer as it was an indictment of those who hide behind it but change nothing. And as a religious person I admit that I have some sympathy with what the editors are saying. When we engage in a sincere act of prayer we open ourselves up to wisdom, to new ways of thinking, to strengthening our spirit so our ego can finally let go of our arguments, our fears, our vanity, our need to be right, our anger at another. Prayer changes us. Maybe not at first, maybe over time, but a sincere act of prayer will never go unanswered. Something shifts in us and that shift results in a new action. And that action, even the action of a nobody, or especially of a

¹ Fulghum, Robert. *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. p. 80.

nobody joined with other nobodies, has the power to move the world.

I have a little plaque in my office that was given to me about a dozen years ago that says, “Prayer changes things.” I believe that it does. Because I do believe that prayer changes people, and then people change things. Prepare ye the way of the Lord begins with preparing ourselves through prayer. .

This Advent we celebrate the announcement of the coming of the Kingdom by a little known man in the wilderness and the birth of a child to a poor couple in a small town. And the world changed. And maybe we can begin to be aware that we don't have to be powerful politicians or celebrities or famous people in order to be used by God. God is ready to use our talents and abilities to change the world, even if it is in a small simple way. God calls us to see that he is at work right now changing the world through our small acts, in our relationships, in our jobs, in our families, in our communities, in our church life. As we pray, as we treat each other with love, as we refrain from selfishness, as we forgive and trust, as we welcome the stranger, then little by little, this place, this community and this world become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, where he shall reign forever and ever.
