

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

December 7, 2003 — Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:1-6

Preached by Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

Did you notice the first sentence in the gospel lesson? It's impressive! It's long, to be sure, but it has a certain rolling cadence, a majestic sound. It's a formal, literary sentence intended to introduce something very important. Listen to a more literal translation:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar — when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod Tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip Tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoenitis, and Lysanias Tetrarch of Abilene — during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.

It sounds important, doesn't it? And did you notice the equally impressive cast of characters listed? They're not the people you'd expect to find in your typical Bible story.

Tiberius Caesar heads the list. He earned first place. Tiberius was the most powerful person on earth. He was the emperor of the Roman Empire. He was in charge of the largest and most powerful empire the world had ever known. He'd been emperor for 15 years, Luke tells us. That is, he'd been the sole ruler of the known world for 15 years. And, if you remember your Roman history, Tiberius was co-emperor with his stepfather, Caesar Augustus, for 10 years before that. That's 25 years of absolute power and the mind-boggling wealth and luxury that goes with it. His rivals were dead — he made sure of that — and the Roman senate feared him. And here he is in a Bible story!

Pontius Pilate, that infamous character from the gospel story, comes next. Pilate was an important man from an important Roman family. Tiberius Caesar appointed him ruler of Judea, the southern part of what we call Israel. As Caesar's governor, he ruled in the name of Caesar and with the power of Rome. He held the power of life and death in his hands. A ruthless power-broker, Pilate was hated by the Jews. And he lived in luxury in a fine seaside palace.

Herod is next on the list. He was a member of the Herod family, a father and sons known for their ruthless and often bloodthirsty rule. Daddy Herod is the monster who killed the babies in Bethlehem trying to get rid of Jesus. Son Herod ruled northern Israel, Galilee. Herod was a friend of Caesar who used Herod to keep Galilee in line. And he did. Nobody messed with Herod. John the Baptist found that out the hard way. Herod killed him.

Herod's brother, Philip, was Tetrarch of the territory east of Galilee. Tetrarchs were what you might call petty princes with enough power to make life miserable for their citizens. Philip might have been petty but he knew how to leverage power. After all, he was a Herod!

Lysanius is next. Another petty prince he joined this list of the high and mighty of the day. These guys made headlines and exercised political, economic and social power. They lived in luxury. If there was a list of the rich and the famous, they'd be at the top of the list.

And here they are in a Bible story!

Luke adds two more names to his list of the high and mighty. Annas and Caiaphas were high priests back then. Now it sounds more like a Bible story. These guys ran the religious life of the Jewish people. They were in charge of the Temple of God — which also happened to be the Bank of Israel! Appointed by Romans, they, too, ruled with enormous power and prestige. Which they used freely!

That's quite a list, isn't it? It's a Who's Who of that world. These are the movers and shakers of the day - a power-elite with all the power necessary to get things done in the world. They made the headlines and determined the fate of millions. And they lived in palaces, wore fine clothes and drove great chariots.

Then, at the end of this long and elegant sentence and at the end of this impressive Who's Who, comes a very unexpected punch line, the word of God came to John, son of Zecharias.

What? Who? Never heard of him. How'd he make this list? I mean, John was a real nobody. He bursts onto the scene and into the sentence without a resume, with no accomplishments and having no power. He was on nobody's A-list for a power lunch. How did this son of a country priest make the same sentence as Caesar, the governor, the high priest? You couldn't find anyone less powerful, more unknown or without influence.

Think about it. God had something to say, something very important. It's the most important thing God had to say up to now. It's a word intended for the whole the world. Everyone needs to hear it.

You'd think God would pick a more strategic voice. It seems God hasn't a good sense of strategy or, perhaps, God's PR department had a day off. I'd imagine some angel whispered to another angel, Bad move, God!

I know I'd do it differently. Wouldn't you? If you want the most important message of all time to get maximum coverage you have to think strategically. I'd arrange for an op-ed piece in the Sunday *New York Times*. Then I'd get an op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal*. (That way I'd cover both liberals and conservatives!) Then I'd get the story in the *USA Today* (that covers everyone left over).

Or, if I were God, I'd convert Tiberius on the spot. I'd have him announce this God-word to the Senate, get it printed and start distribution around the world. Here's the new policy

for life and good government! Read and believe! God could do that, you know, and so could Tiberius. At the least, I'd get Pontius Pilate on board. His support would be crucial.

But that's not the way God works, it seems. When God had another really big word to give to pharaoh, the Caesar of his day, God picked a shepherd named Moses who was working in what the Bible calls the backside of the desert. It was as far from the imperial power of Egypt as Moses could get. He was on the run from the authorities back in Egypt.

When God wanted a new king for Israel, the greatest king of all time, God sent his prophet to find him. Samuel, the prophet, went to see a man in Bethlehem named Jesse who had some impressive sons. None of them was the man. The great king was, in fact, Jesse's youngest son David, another shepherd off with the sheep. His own father didn't think he was up to the job of king. But God wasn't impressed by David's larger, more experienced brothers. God spoke and David was God's king.

And when God wanted a nation to speak through, a people to love and who would love God, God picked a slave nation, the weakest nation on earth, Moses reminded them later. They weren't attractive either, Moses added. Apparently God isn't impressed by the people and things that impress us. And, it seems, God bypasses the natural picks for big jobs for obscure and unlikely people living far, far from power — and often living in great difficulty. Think about it! It's a preview of the Christmas story. God's final and ultimate word comes through nobodies named Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, Elizabeth and some mangy shepherds.

But our gospel story goes on — and it's even more astonishing. The word of God came to John, of all people, in the wilderness, of all places! Why does God speak in the wilderness to one man, one set of ears off in a hostile, difficult, harsh, lonely and dangerous place?

Not Rome and its Forum, teeming with people. Not the Temple in Jerusalem packed with God-fearing worshippers. Not some nice place either, say a palace or prestigious address. Nope, God spoke to John — in the wilderness.

It's not the first time God spoke in the wilderness — to nearly no one. Remember Moses on the backside of the desert? Then and there, the word of God came to Moses. Then God spoke a really big word, The Law. God took Israel, that rabble of former slaves, to the middle of a desolate wilderness in the Sinai Peninsula - to a spot no one can find to this day. Then and there God spoke.

John in the wilderness wasn't the last time God spoke in the wilderness either. Jesus came to this same wilderness where he wrestled with temptation, his own vocation and evil. And there, in the wilderness, God spoke a word. Later, the Apostle Paul went to Arabian Desert and God spoke to him there.

It seems clear that God speaks in the wilderness. And, God speaks to people in the wilderness. Voice crying in the wilderness, is the way the prophet Isaiah puts it. A voice speaking to the wilderness of Israel's harsh exile. Far from home and the comforts of their ancient faith, God's people lived in a spiritual desert.

I suppose God speaks in the desert because we hear better in the wilderness chapters of our lives. And, I suppose, obscure and out-of-power people, most of whom live in wildernesses, hear God better than the rich, the famous, the powerful.

We all have them, wilderness experiences in life. You know them, those barren, empty, harsh, dangerous and faith-shaking times of life. We may be all dressed up and looking fine today, but we know what lies behind appearances. Life at its best, can be dry, lonely, difficult and harsh. It hurts.

All of us have the memory of wilderness times. Some of you, maybe many of you are living in a wilderness today. We all carry these wildernesses with us.

I heard from an old friend this week. Margaret was an intern at Park Street Church when I was there. She is now a theologian teaching at a university out east. I told you about Margaret's husband last spring in Lent.

Hyung Goo Kim, son of Korean immigrants, was a brilliant scientist. I remember when he told me he was HIV positive. It was the same day he asked if I'd perform he and Margaret's wedding. I did and Hyung Goo lived four more years. I conducted his memorial service and burial.

This week Margaret wrote to tell me she's finally completed a book about their marriage. It was published last week. She titled her book *Sing Me to Heaven*. I read the book over the weekend. It's the riveting story of a marriage that took place in the wilderness. It's Margaret's theological/spiritual reflection on that terrible wilderness experience. It's a story of faith in the midst of tragedy and the triumph of love even in death. Some of you know that wilderness.

Wilderness times may end but they're never over. Margaret will carry her wilderness with her all her life.

The point of our story is this: God speaks to people in wildernesses. What did God say? God is coming, John announced. The Lord is near. Get ready. Clean house. Open the doors and windows of your life. Welcome God.

And God did come — in Jesus Christ who came to that same wilderness to suffer with us and for us. He spent his life helping people who lived in the wildernesses of life.

Luke finishes his story by telling that this is very good news. It's God's good news! Jesus Christ did come. And, Jesus Christ still comes to us — in the wilderness, your wilderness.

Are you ready? He s coming! Do you have some house cleaning to do? Are the doors and windows of your life open? He s coming.

This is very good news. Two thousand years ago, the early Christians prayed for Christ to come to each communion service — and, of course, to each day of life. They prayed, O Christ, come. Can we pray it today? Join me, O Christ come.