

## The Word of God Still Comes

### Luke 3:1-6

We were standing in a barn last Christmas Eve, with maybe 40 other people – no one famous, mostly farmers and neighbors and family folk from tiny towns and villages in Highland County, Virginia. Highland's the most sparsely populated county east of the Mississippi River; so sparsely populated that the US government designates it as "frontier territory." We were in that barn for what is for me, the best Christmas pageant ever. There were no handbells or brass or other instruments; only our human voices. There were only some candles before the holy family, a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, and two lights for a small choir to see their music. We gathered in silence and departed the same way; in the midst of singing carols and hearing the story and an offered prayer, we were invited simply to be quiet and still to ponder the wonder of God coming into our midst in Christ. In that silence, all we heard was the sound of a donkey shifting weight in the straw, and the occasional cooing of a recently born babe. It was elegant and holy in its simplicity, and I thought, "This may be the closest I'll ever get to the real Christmas, when the first message came in the middle of nowhere to nobodies working the night shift, with no notice or fanfare given by the rich and famous. This is the way God comes."

I remembered that holy night this week as I read our gospel lesson. Once again God acts in John the Baptizer in mysterious and mischievous ways. For sure, Luke begins his story by mentioning the famous powerful shakers and movers who seem to be in control: Emperor Tiberius, Governor Pilate, Kings Herod Antipas and Philip and Lysanias. We know these guys from history and their connection to mighty Rome. Naming them reminds us that our story of salvation is rooted in real time in a real world. Ours is not some wishful thinking made-up fairy tale in a magical world; but takes place in this place, this world, this reality in all grittiness and splendor. Describing the end of the story, someone got it right when they wrote, "I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap; at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek . . . at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died. And that is what he died about."<sup>1</sup>

So too at the beginning, with John the Baptizer. He comes into a world where wealth and power and status and oppression and injustice are real and a few control the lives of many and centers of power are well known: Rome. Jerusalem. London. Washington. Moscow. But our story suggests that the real action, the real power, what's worth really paying attention happens elsewhere – in a stable in Bethlehem or in a barren trackless wilderness in the middle of nowhere near a sorry little river. It is *there* that the word of God comes to a nobody named John.

Which is very good news, because if God speaks to a nobody like John, there's a very good possibility that God will still speak to us with something to say to us if we will be open to such surprises. And if that word still comes in the middle of nowhere, there's a very good possibility that God will speak to us in our ordinary, out of the way lives.

Such a thing happened with a young pastor and his wife serving a small Methodist circuit on the northeast coast of England during World War 2. There was a nearby German prisoner of war camp and out of a deep sense of compassion they felt compelled to reach out to those despised German soldiers. They screwed up their courage and met the camp commander with a plan to take a prisoner to church each Sunday and then to their home for dinner. Surprisingly, he agreed. Sunday by Sunday a steady flow of prisoners worshiped and ate with Nellie and Frank Baker. One of their German prisoner guests was a young man named Jurgen Moltmann, who would one day become one of the most significant theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; one of his most important books is titled *Theology of Hope*; he claimed that the seed of hope was first planted in his heart at that Methodist dinner table.<sup>2</sup> Through such a small thing, something great happened in an out of the way with ordinary people. I wonder what God might do at our tables, with our lives, with our compassion if we look and listen?

Here's more good news: if the word of God comes in a dry trackless wilderness, it still comes to us when we're lost in a wilderness or our life is barren or we're unsure about which end is up. You see, time and again in scripture, God draws closest to God's people when they're in the wilderness, or life feels uncertain and we know we can't save ourselves because "we got nothing." That's precisely where God shows up to save and heal and provide; good news.

And it's good news to hear that this God still comes with a word to any with ears to hear is a God who takes rough and crooked places and low valleys and mountains too high and hard to climb and in mercy makes space for us to stand and thrive and experience salvation and peace. We have God's word on it: in the end we will know health and healing and wholeness and forgiveness and light and life and restoration of all that is broken in us. These are not idle promises or empty words because God's first and last word always is mercy, mercy, mercy.

That blessed mercy calls us to turn toward such good things, to turn from ways that lead nowhere good and to walk the Way that leads to life that really is life,. That's what it means to repent – not just to say I'm sorry, but to turn and go a different way, to be reoriented, to follow a better compass. Even the turning is a mercy; God's grace nudges us and whispers to us to listen and turn toward home and away from whatever's harmful or hurtful. It's a kind and blessed mercy because it's so easy to lose our way with one small step or to think we know what's best or head off confidently in the wrong direction following the wrong leader. In 2013 I joined a friend in walking the Camino in Spain, a route that for a thousand years has taken pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela, here tradition says is St. James' final resting place. On my friend's first day, he set out with someone whose confidence suggested she knew her way around. After a while though, he thought they were going the wrong way, but she was so sure and composed. Then a bit later he learned this was her first day on the Camino too; first chance he got, he slipped away to go back and find the right way. By the way, he never saw her again.

I think also of another friend who spent a weekend with my family in Highland County. On our way home here, we got gas in Staunton and there I told him to get onto I-81 North to I-64 East. Little did I know then that he got onto I-81 *South* and didn't realize he was going the wrong way until he saw exits for Roanoke. Several hours after I got home, he pulled up our house.

He'd lost his way, but he turned back toward home, which was a very good thing since our daughter and one of her little friends was in the car with him.

I imagine that like me, you hope God wants us home and is not finished with you; there are parts of our lives that are not life-giving or good for us or anyone else. There are rough places that need smoothing - a damaged relationship or a nagging worry or bitterness poisoning life's sweetness or unholy anger or forgiveness you just can't give but know is needed, or an addiction that rules you in a way you wish the living God did. I imagine there's a hunger and thirst in you for something better, to experience more fully the life and love we see in Christ. The great good news, precious and beloved child of God, is the God of mercy wants that for you, too. That word of God still comes to us today, with the promise that as we turn toward home and toward God in new ways, we surely are met by the tender mercy of God who will guide our feet on the path of peace. This is the blessing and hope of Advent. So the word of the God still comes and promises. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> George MacLeod, founder of the Iona (Scotland) community; cited here: <https://itsforministry.org/outside-holiness>

<sup>2</sup> Paul W. Chilcote, *The Fullest Possible Love: Living in Harmony with God and Neighbor* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2024), 123f.