
The Word of God Came

Luke 3:1-6

A sermon preached by Luke A. Powery at Duke Chapel on December 9, 2012

My next three sermons will be based on the book of Luke. I know what some of you might be thinking—that I'm a bit biased because I think Luke has the best name in the bible for obvious reasons. One of our chapel staff members (I won't name names, but he waves his arms a lot) asked if my series would be called "Luke Preaching on Luke: The Autobiography." Don't worry. It won't be about me. At least today, it's about a God who is full of surprises, acting in ways we, religious folk, never approved. Why doesn't God check in with us about his strategic plan from time to time? Did you know that God is a God who can't be locked in a safety box theologically and acts in ways that systematic theology doesn't always allow? Blue Devils Newsflash: God doesn't follow the sanctified status quo. How else could Duke Chapel now have a reformed baptist as a dean? God is full of surprises (for all of us)!

And we ought to be surprised this morning. The beloved physician, Luke, says something very peculiar. "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." Peculiar. The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness? Didn't God check John's resume before doing this? John would not make it into GQ magazine. He makes clothing fashion statements by wearing camel's hair. John was turned down for a job on the Food Network because he wanted to teach viewers how to combine North Carolina barbecue with locusts and wild honey. Let me be clear if I'm not clear enough already. John isn't a Little House on the Prairie-Justin Bieber kind of man. He would not be high on your list of babysitters! Am I clear enough now? He's a prophet and no one wants to hire a prophet, a marginalized figure, on the fringes of social acceptance. No wealth. No prestige. No Duke connection. No power, seemingly. Just one prophetic voice crying out, yearning to get our attention here in Durham. And it is to him the word of God came. An unlikely person in an unlikely place.

What was God thinking? Look at all of the people God bypassed to be the divine spokesperson. "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 . . . in the wilderness." One John juxtaposed with the seven others. But these seven individuals are not just anybody. They are the movers and shakers of society. The VIPs of the day. The emperor, the governor, the rulers, the high priests. The political and religious leaders, the authority structures, those with power and prestige and wealth. The dealmakers of the day, the death wielders of the day, the powerbrokers of the day. The glamour and glitz gurus of our day. The Ones who "reign and rule" the earthly kingdom. They don't receive the word of God as we might expect. But the word of God came to a weirdo in the wilderness. God surprises us and suggests that his reign and kingdom function differently. The imperial rule of domination of that day is placed into question as the word of God came to 'insignificant' John and not the usual suspects. The linguistic advent of God is an implicit indictment against the earthly powers of the day.

One might expect the rulers of the day to be the headlining performers in the drama of life, but here, in the theological theater of the advent of God, Dr. Luke presents these supposed major actors on the world stage as the warm-up act to the word of God coming to John. I doubt enough tickets would be sold to fill Memorial Chapel if John was the featured preacher proclaiming the word of God. John? Someone on the borderlands of human existence, someone we least expect to have anything worthwhile to offer, someone

we've erased from the pages of humanity because they don't talk right or act right or look right, they don't have the right calling card or the right undergraduate degree or the right color of blue on their sports jersey, or the right family history or the right immigration paperwork or the right political affiliation or the right denominational connection but frequently they may be right in front of us, a prophet crying out with a wondrous word of God for the world. God is full of surprises this Advent season.

The word of God didn't come to the many mighty rulers of the empire, but to one person, an itinerant prophet, hanging out in a strange location. The wilderness. The desert. I've seen the deserts of the Holy Land with my own eyes. Take it from me. It's not a summer vacation destination. A wilderness, not the Mad Hatter. No food, no water, no facebook friends, no iphone, no texting, no tweeting (like someone may be doing right now). A wilderness. A place of anxiety, fear, abandonment, more questions than answers, wandering like the children of Israel or being tempted like Jesus. Not the halls of academia or the cozy and cushy seat of political or religious power. A wilderness. A desert. Have you ever been there? A dry, thirsty place. Well, that's where the word came. Why don't we hold church growth seminars there? I don't see anyone rushing there to learn anything about life or love or God. But many run to the biggest church with the biggest crowd, and the coolest and most charismatic pastor, and the flashiest technology, and the hottest music from the praise band, and the slickest lighting system in the sanctuary and the best coffee in the lobby and the smartest marketing strategy to brand their ministry—that's where many seek a word to sustain their lives.

But God is full of surprises because Luke reminds us that the word of God may not even come to whom or where we expect it. The word of God came to John in the wilderness. An unlikely person in an unlikely place. When the word comes, it may not confirm what we already know or expect, but instead shock us out of our spiritual slumber to see God and God's kingdom in a new and different way. It should be shocking where the word of God lands in today's text. We should be immanently surprised by the transcendent Holy who constantly uses unlikely characters for the grand purpose of redemption. When the word comes, it should rock and roll us to the rhythm of the heartbeat of God, a rhythm that moves to the pulse of the outcasts of the world. The word of God came to John in the wilderness, the borderlands. That innocent man on death row. That woman, struggling with mental health issues, talking to herself on 9th Street.

The unknown black bards, the anonymous, enslaved, dehumanized creators of the African American spirituals. The word of God came to them, unlikely people in an unlikely predicament. In his 1922 poetic eulogy for the creators of the spirituals, Harlem Renaissance literary artist, James Weldon Johnson, writes,

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?
Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?

Heart of what slave poured out such melody
As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains
His spirit must have nightly floated free,
Though still about his hands he felt his chains.
Who heard great "Jordan roll"? Whose starward eye
Saw chariot "swing low"? And who was he

That breathed that comforting, melodic sigh,
"Nobody knows de trouble I see"? [...]

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,
That from degraded rest and servile toil
The fiery spirit of the seer should call
These simple children of the sun and soil.
O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
You—you alone, of all the long, long line
Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.

You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings;
No chant of bloody war, no exulting pean
Of arms-won triumphs; but your humble strings
You touched in chord with music empyrean.
You sang far better than you knew; the songs
That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed
Still live,—but more than this to you belongs:
You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.

These songs, the spirituals, still live, as we've heard the chapel choir sing them throughout this semester. These melodic words of God, the spirituals, are musical memorabilia created on the anvil of misery. They are the word of God formed and performed in the crucible of slavery yet the miracle is that these songs continue to be sung across generations and cultures as they are the "human soul painted in the color of music" (John Work). The so-called unlettered, untaught, unsophisticated, and unknown from the underside teach us about joy and suffering and hope and Jesus. Each time we sing these songs, we sit in their spiritual classroom to hear again and again the wisdom of the word of God from their mouths. The word of God came through "Steal Away to Jesus." The word of God came through "Nobody Knows de Trouble I See." The word of God came through "Go Down, Moses." The word of God came through "Wade in the Water." The word of God came through "Soon-a will be done with the troubles of the world." The word of God came through "Swing low, Sweet chariot." The word of God came through "Git on board little children." The word of God came through "Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart I will pray." The word of God came through "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The word of God came to and through unlikely people in an unlikely place! God is full of surprises!

The word of God came to John in the wilderness and it has had revolutionary ripple effects ever since. But what if the word of God never came? What if heaven and earth never kissed to form a royal baby? Where would we be? It would not be the best of times; it would be the worst of times. "Life for [us] would be no crystal stair" (Langston Hughes). Because if the word of God never came, the blind would never see. If the word of God never came, the lame would never walk. If the word of God never came, lepers would never be cleansed. If the word of God never came, the deaf would never hear. If the word of God never came, the dead would never be raised. If the word of God never came, the gospel would never be preached. If the word of God never came, we would be left with our own words and you know what damage they can do.

If the word of God never came, we would never hear the angels singing on high. If the word of God never came, death's dark shadow would never be put to flight. If the word of God never came, there would never be a rose e'er blooming from a tender stem. If the word of God never came, there would be no joy to the world. If the word never came, the musical majesty of advent and Christmas would be miserably mute and the only sound in the universe that would vibrate the strings of our hearts would be the silence of suffering.

But because the word of God came, we do not only join the cosmic symphony of song, but may preach, dance, shout, or even shutter in awe-filled silence because when the word of God comes, the word doesn't leave us, or the world, the same. You and I have been changed and we'll never be the same. We're a new creation surprised by the word of God who came to fill valleys and lower mountains and smoothen rough ways and straighten crooked paths and people. In other words, the word of God came to save the lost and transform a crooked and violent world, that no professional football player or anyone else would think of committing a murder-suicide again; that tragedies, like a homeless man arguing with and then pushing another man onto New York City subway tracks to be hit by a subway, would cease. The word of God came as God's nonviolent gesture of grace to put an end to all violence and death. So much grace that the word just came without our earning it or asking for it. But amazing grace knows that we need it. So much grace that the Rose e'er blooming would eventually grow a crown of thorns enduring the very violence he came to put an end to; now I know why roses are really red.

This is not what we expected from God's Word but it is exactly what we needed. Right on time. In the nick of time. Saved by an on-time God who came because he was dying to love us. "Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Philippians 2). The way of Jesus Christ, the word of God, is through the human wilderness. The word of God came to John in the wilderness because the word of God is revealed and heard in the marginal, liminal spaces of society. I know we come to Duke Chapel to hear the word of God so I realize that I may be preaching myself out of a job, because Luke shows us that the word of God lands in the mouths of unlikely people in unlikely places. This advent, you may be surprised where and through whom you meet God, the child of Mary and King of glory.

So in the fourth year of the U.S. presidency of Barack Obama, when Beverly Purdue was governor of North Carolina, and Kay Hagan and Richard Burr were senators of North Carolina, and Bill Bell mayor of Durham, during the new tenure of Luke Powery as dean of Duke Chapel, the word of God came. That is the promise and the hope—that the word of God will come to you today in your existential, spiritual, psychological, emotional, physical, economic, or social wilderness. But it may come through an unlikely person in an unlikely place. It maybe as unlikely as an incarnate God lying in a manger or even hanging out in a strange location on an old-rugged rosy cross.