
PECULIAR PEOPLE

LUKE 3:1-6

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL FOR THE BACCALAUREATE
SERVICES ON MAY 10-11, 2019,
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

*It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood,
A beautiful day for a neighbor,
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?*

*It's a neighborly day in this beautywood,
A neighborly day for a beauty,
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?*

.....
Won't you be my neighbor?

It's a beautiful day in this Duke blue devil neighborhood, isn't it? It's a spectacular day in this neighborhood, this blue hood! Where is the crazy towel guy when I need him?! This is a real moment of celebration for you, class of 2019, when it might have seemed as if this day would never come and we know some of your family members thought this day would never come. No more tuition bills, parents! So parents, if you don't know how to do it already, I encourage you to do the floss dance by the time this weekend is over. And don't worry. You won't look that peculiar compared to Lady Gaga's recent epic entrance on the red carpet at the Met Gala with her four wardrobe changes! Compared to her, you'll be more like Mr. Fred Rogers singing, "Won't you be my neighbor?" on his PBS children's show. If we are honest, even Mr. Rogers was a bit peculiar. A little weird perhaps.

But he's actually in good company if you keep in mind the scripture you heard, "The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." A peculiar person in a peculiar place. The gospel writer Luke doesn't describe John so much as tell us what he says. But in the book of Mark, we hear that John the Baptist is the kind of guy who makes clothing fashion statements by wearing camel's hair. John might fit right in with Lady Gaga. He wouldn't make it into GQ magazine nor would he be hired for a job on the Food Network because his diet always included NC barbecued locusts and wild honey. John isn't high on your list of babysitters or teaching assistants or U.S. presidential candidates (though that would make it even more interesting!). John's a prophet, and no one wants to hire a prophet, a marginalized migrant figure on the borderlands of human existence. No wealth, no prestige, no Duke degree, no power seemingly. Just one prophetic voice crying out. Pretty peculiar, if you ask me. And it is to him, the word of God comes. And all God needs is one peculiar person.

The writer Luke makes this very clear because he juxtaposes John with the many others. It's an obvious contrast right from the beginning and I want to be sure you caught it. "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." The writer Luke basically throws some serious shade on all of the seven others and basically tells them as if he's at a Duke Men's basketball game, "Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, see ya!"

The emperor, the governor, the rulers, even the priests of the day who think they can control God, the civic and religious leaders, the authority structures, those with power, prestige, and wealth, the movers and shakers of society, the dealmakers of the day, the death wielders of the day, the powerbrokers of the day. The VIPs of the day. The glamour and glitz gurus of the day. They do not receive the word of God. But the word of God comes to a weirdo in the wilderness.

A peculiar person in a peculiar place. One might expect the high-profile esteemed 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, the supposed major actors on the world stage are just the warm-up acts to the word of God coming to John. John. Someone on the margins of society, someone we least expect to have anything worthwhile to say, 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 skin color or the right calling card or the right undergraduate degree or the right fraternity or sorority or the right family history or the right immigration paperwork or the right political affiliation or the right color blue, but many times they may be right in front of us, a peculiar prophet crying out with a word from God.

The word didn't come to the many mighty and powerful rulers of the empire, but to one person, an itinerant prophet, hanging out in a strange location. The wilderness, a desert. Believe me, no K-ville tenting is going on there! But we are reminded that the word, the answer, the gift, the revelation, the resource, the divine 'aha,' may not come from whom we expect or be where we expect.

The words of wisdom and insight we need may actually come from peculiar people who are off of our social relational radars. It may come from the mouth of one person who's not even popular like Clackston. I remember Clackston at the Church of the Holy Comforter's soup kitchen in Atlanta. I didn't know that was his name at first because when I first met him and asked him his name, he just said, "Get out of here, get out of here." A strange greeting. He said that because he came to believe that was his name since that's what everybody always told him—"Get out of here." How would you like to have your first name be "get out" and your last name be "of here"? Pretty peculiar, if you ask me. But I realized that it was a lesson, an insight, a revelation, on how to treat every human being and invite them to be in relationship and say 'come here' instead of 'get out of here.'

The words of wisdom and insight we need may come from peculiar people, those we least expect to have anything worthwhile to offer, especially if they're a child. My niece Christiana experienced her own human wilderness in 2005. At 10 years old, this baby girl of one of my brothers, died from a rare autoimmune disease, juvenile dermatomyositis. Only 3 out of 1 million children get it. It's a long name for a disease that shortened her young life. There are no cures. One organ at a time stopped functioning. She was a little girl, an athlete, who at the worst point of her disease couldn't even put on a T-shirt or lift a towel off of a rack, or open a jar, because she was too weak. Her spirit was willing but her body was weak. Her IV needles were her nails, her hospital bed her cross.

But in her physical wilderness, a word came as she kept her journal. She prayed for her own healing, but many times at the end of journal entries she would pray for others. She prayed for "the little baby next door in the hospital with the unknown liquid inside her body." But there came a point when she couldn't write in her journal anymore because she was too weak. And on the last day she could muster up enough strength to write, she was praying for others as she usually did. Her last two words are the beginning of a prayer—"Also, touch." That's how the journal ends. "Also, touch." It's an open-ended prayer for the world; there's no 'amen' to conclude it because this prayer travels on. No criteria or creed or color listed, just a prayer for you and me and the whole weird world. "Also, touch." Such insight, such a word, such a gift, such love, from a 10-year-old girl on a hospital bed where her physical features became so distorted by steroids and other medicines that it was hard to see what she really looked like. Pretty peculiar, if you ask me. "Also, touch."

Clackston and Christiana reveal that the gift we may need may actually come from unlikely people in unlikely places, and not from the usual suspects. God may not be where you are looking for agents of change and hope and life,

that is, with the powerful. Rather, God may be speaking through those deemed powerless, insignificant, and weird. As you graduate, it's so important not to underestimate strange and peculiar people because they may be the ones powerful enough to make a difference in the world and in your life. God uses weirdos, like John, peculiar people, unlikely choices, the weak, those with no network and low net worth to make a difference, to pave the way to a fruitful future, to be harbingers of hope, leaders of love, proclaimers of peace, and fuelers of faith. This is so we recognize that no one is unimportant to God and every peculiar person has potential and power because God may be speaking through *whom* and moving *where* you would have never imagined. Peculiar people may be the prophets of our time. Look for them. Listen to them. Love them.

And speaking of love, there are those who didn't want to listen to Mr. Rogers when he wanted to focus on children's programming for public television and start his series, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, in 1968. Mr. Rogers didn't wear camel's hair but he had distinct clothing and would change his top and his shoes every time he entered his special television neighborhood. He was definitely peculiar in his own way as we see in the documentary, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* Mr. Rogers was so centered on love that we hear such wise words from him such as, "I love you just the way you are." Or, "You don't have to do anything sensational to be loved." Regardless of how others might have perceived him or made fun of him, he was courageous enough to be himself and shared the gift of being human with children and adults and believed that the greatest evil is when others make you feel less than you are. What a word. "I love you just the way you are," Duke degree or not. Mr. Rogers was so committed to love that he drove himself to maintain a body weight of 143 pounds because the number 143 stood for "I (1 letter) Love (4 letters) You (3 letters)." 143. Now that is pretty peculiar, if you ask me. His goal was not be an emperor or governor or ruler or in charge. His goal was to be sure that his entire life said, in word and deed to everyone he encountered—I love you. That is beautiful. Not just a beautiful day or a beautiful neighborhood but a beautiful, peculiar life.

Peculiar people. They're everywhere. John the Baptist, Clackston, Christiana, Mr. Rogers. Look for them. Listen to them. Love them because by hearing their words, you might just be hearing God. Class of 2019, may your future path and neighborhood be beautifully peculiar. My name is Luke Powery and I approve this message.