

December 9, Advent 2C (Luke 3:1-6)

## **John the Baptist's proclamation for a world of Tiberiuses and Trumps**

October 30, 2018

Great preaching expands imagination. It can also stifle originality. Have you ever heard a sermon that was so good that it changed your view of a text in perpetuity? It's as if the preacher hijacked your exegetical prowess and is holding your creativity hostage. Case in point: Gardner Calvin Taylor's exquisite sermon entitled "The Strange Ways of God."

I heard a recording of this sermon nearly 20 years ago, and I cannot escape its gravitational pull. Taylor's mellifluous baritone rings in my ears whenever I encounter Luke 3. The prince of preachers declared, "Dwight D. Eisenhower being president of the United States and John Patterson the governor of Alabama, J. Edgar Hoover the omnipotent autocrat of the FBI, Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale, the high priests of middle America, the word of God came to Martin Luther King in the wilderness of America."

Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas existed in a world long ago and far away. Many readers, however, will have living memories of Ike, Patterson, Hoover, Graham, and Peale. Taylor contemporized Luke's Gospel and coaxed music from it. And that music has become embedded in my preaching mind.

Donald John Trump being president of the United States and Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III the attorney general, Rudolph Giuliani the ubiquitous and loquacious defender of the present order, Franklin Graham, Paula White, and Joel Osteen the prophets of American civil religion, the word of God came to preachers preparing to proclaim the gospel on the Second Sunday of Advent in 2018.

The word of God bypasses the power of the state and the influence of established religion. It treks into the wilderness and seizes John, a strangely clad man with even stranger dietary proclivities. Is God's word suspicious of political and ecclesial

power? Is it searching for the alienated, the disenfranchised, and the dispossessed—like Martin Luther King, like Fannie Lou Hamer, like John, like many of us?

What if you don't qualify as a wilderness dweller? Will God's word bypass you this Second Sunday of Advent? Will it really come to relatively comfortable, theologically trained people like you and me? Maybe the church you serve is a big steeple in the county seat. Perhaps you serve a sprawling, suburban, media-savvy house of worship with multiple campuses. You might be a professor ensconced in an office overflowing with books, papers, and countless coffee-stained mugs. Are you none of the above? Just a curious person who reads the *Century* for kicks?

You're most likely reading this because you won't leave God's word alone, or because God's word won't leave you alone. And in this text, God's word seeks out one living on the underside of the empire and the wrong side of the guardians of theological language and cultic practice. For those who do not live on the wrong side of power, it appears that fidelity to God's word demands deep connection with those who do.

We should be concerned when well-heeled folk engage in God-talk or God-work without the benefit of the wisdom of the Johns of this world. Theology and ministry born of the Tiberiuses and Trumps reinscribe privilege, power, and a vision of God that tramples those in the wilderness. We must not bypass John in the interest of imperial theology. To bypass John is to bypass God.

John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance is a rich theological deposit that we have left unmined. The American church, mirroring the American economy in the hands of those who worship at the church of unrestrained capital, believes in privatization. The church taught me the privatized, personalized version of *metanoia*, or repentance. The cosmic aspect of *metanoia*, however, yields rich fruit for the people of God.

John's baptism of repentance is not simply a call for piety and morality. It is nothing short of the labor pains preceding the inauguration of God's reign. John is calling for the world to change—spiritually, economically, politically, and socially—in anticipation of the advent of the Human One. John is a direct threat to imperial theology and power. Enlightened spiritual gurus who transform spirits and leave the social order uninterrupted don't get beheaded by the state.

Isaiah's soaring poetry is cited to cast the vision. "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." This is not a private matter. The earth will never be the same. Humanity will never be the same.

Gardner Taylor was right. God's ways are strange. We bypass John; God seeks John out. We use God to prop up our imperial designs and our politics that enshrine privilege. God fills the valleys of our violence with peace and destroys our mountains of mendacity. Even now, God is straightening the crooked calculations of plutocrats and oligarchs and the prophets for profit whom they employ. The rough machinations of those who dehumanize God's beloved to gain advantage, who value the accumulation of money and power above all else, are being smoothed by the power of God's Spirit. On this Second Sunday of Advent, preach so that all flesh will see the strange ways of God together.