

**United Church of Fayetteville
310 E. Genesee Street
Fayetteville, NY 13066**

**Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even
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LUKE 3:1-6

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. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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.'"

THUNK! Luke 3:1-6

"The lectionary." There is frequent reference made to the lectionary when introducing the reading of Scripture throughout the year. It might be helpful to refresh our memories about what the lectionary is and why we use it. As it turned out it was a reminder I needed myself this week.

"The lectionary" refers to a recommended cycle of readings from Hebrew scriptures, the psalms, gospels and letters to the church over a three year cycle. If followed completely, we would be exposed to roughly 70% of Hebrew Scripture and 90% of the New Testament in that time period. While it is not without its limitations, there are a number of advantages to using the lectionary: it keeps me from preaching only on my (or your) favorite texts, or avoiding my (or your) least favorite texts; it leads us to consider God's word within the whole scope of our inherited scriptures; and it helps establish the worship rhythms which guide us through the liturgical year.

I am not wedded to the lectionary. There are times in the life of the culture or in the life of the congregation when we need to consider another word from God. I was, however, looking forward to getting back to the lectionary this Advent after our fall of special celebrations and four-week *Renewed in the Spirit* series. Then I began studying Advent's recommended texts and realized I have never heard the names of the biblical experts who shape the lectionary from cycle to cycle. I believe they intentionally remain anonymous for fear of meeting anyone who actually attempts to preach from it. As I would tell anyone who would listen to me in the last six weeks, "This is a terrible Advent lectionary year." We don't get any angel stories, no dreams, no courageous acts defying society's mores, no meeting between pregnant mothers. And while normally we get signs and portents, **or** John the Baptist, this year we get both. No wonder people rush ahead to the baby Jesus (a baby Jesus who is missing, by the way, from the manger in the hallway, so I trust those of you who began Advent with last week's worship are looking for the baby Jesus where ever he may be found). But here we are – missing a baby Jesus and with John the Baptist. Where is the good news in this?

Then I remembered that indeed all of these things are good news. They are recorded in books called the "gospels," which means "good news", and were received as good news by their original hearers. So I determined, on behalf of us all, to go looking for the good news. Still muttering to myself: "John the Baptist, retro wardrobe, organic diet, bad hair, strap of the sandal, brood of vipers, winnowing fire – yep – there is going to be good news here," I ran into my next problem. Half of the reading is the listing of the rulers of John's day – a formula for early readers saying "here comes a prophet" – a formula as sure as "once upon a time" tells us there is a fairy tale coming. Half the reading, but not the whole problem. The lectionary advisors' razor cut the story short. Our reading for the day stops before it gets to any description of John the Baptist. in fact, he's not even called John the Baptist yet. We hear none

of his preaching, just one quote from Isaiah. On the upside, John really hadn't hit his fire and brimstone stride yet, but still, what in the world are we supposed to do with this?

Then I did what I do most weeks, (and what most preachers I know do). I started walking around my office reading the text out loud. Why? We're not practicing for Sunday morning. When the texts were written, with limited copies available, the assumption was that far more people would hear them read in public worship than would read them themselves. Also, as we know today, our brains do different things when we are reading out loud, when our eyes, lips, tongues and ears are all working as well as our language centers, than when we are simply moving our eyes across the page. In other words, when reading out loud, one can literally hear things one might otherwise not.

So I started to read, and sure enough, I began to hear something. Listen and see if you can hear 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 (Thunk! – hit the pulpit) to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." Did you hear it? Right there? Listen again.

"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 (Thunk! – hit the pulpit) to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

Did you hear it? Right there in the middle of history, when nations and states were doing their business, when politics was messy and the religious world was tangled in the sacred and the secular – right there (thunk!) came the word of God. It came as it always comes, dropping into in the middle of a busy world. The word of God doesn't wait for a quiet time – a lull between events (a good thing because when is there ever a lull?) The word of God doesn't wait until a special day on the calendar. The word of God can and does come (thunk!) at any time in hectic world. It falls into the civil and political and religious business of the whole world. Perhaps that's why listing the history and business of the world is a formula to announce the coming of a prophet. Its takes listening to hear God's word in the midst of all that – a word that lands with a loud thunk or a gentle bump or a whisper in the night or the rustle of leaves across the wind. The word of God comes. And the word that came to John was indeed good news. The time is near and will soon be upon us when the things foretold by Isaiah will come to be. The one who was promised is coming!

And how easy it would have been for John, caught up in the turmoil of the day, to have missed that good news – – to not have heard the word of God fall into the middle of history. How easy to be for us to miss it this year in the midst of hectic lives, while we race to appointments, check things off our to do list, manage our schedules, scan the news and worry about the future – how easy it would be for us to miss the good news...

So let us, the heirs of all the prophets who came before, the sons and daughters on whom the Spirit was poured out – let us listen:

In the eighth year of the war in Afghanistan, in the first year of the administration of Obama and Biden, when Schumer and Gilliland were US Senators from New York, and Maffei the representative, when Patterson was governor, Velesky was a state senator. Stirpe an assemblyman, and Mahoney was the executive of Onondaga County, Even was the pastor and Dehority, the moderator of The United Church, the word of God comes (thunk) to us as it came to John. The day is coming and soon will be here! Our way will be made clear in the wilderness of our lives. In the deserts of our need, growth will spring up. The thirst of our souls will be quenched. The poor will find work and the hungry will be fed. And peace shall come. The one who is promised is coming and already here. The time is coming and will soon be here when all flesh will see the healing and wholeness of God's salvation. Listen. Can we hear the word of God, the good news of salvation for all creation, falling (thunk) into our lives right now?