

“Unforgettable”
Luke 3:1-18
Andrew Foster Connors
2nd Sunday in Advent
December 6, 2015

John the Baptist appears in all of the Gospels but Luke’s Gospel is the only one with a list of all the power players ruling during John and Jesus’ time. There’s Tiberius Caesar the ruler of the Roman Empire. There’s Pontius Pilate the regional Governor who will call the shots around Jesus’ execution. There’s Herod the puppet King who will be threatened by the claim that Jesus is “King” of the Jews, along with his brother, Philip, and Lysanius, rulers of the adjacent regions. Then there’s Annas & Caiphas the high priests, the authorized spokespeople for the Jewish faith of John and Jesus. Actually, there was only one high priest. Luke may have been uncertain of which one occupied the position so he named them both to cover his bases.¹ Put them all together and these are the kinds of people who are supposed to be remembered. The ones with their names etched on buildings, listed in the newspapers, remembered by contemporaries. These are the power players, the change makers, those whose names enter the history books.

Luke names them all to remind us of who’s in charge and then promptly shifts away from them. Away from the centers of power and into the wilderness to meet some crowds hungry for forgiveness, a preacher proclaiming the way. Luke is saying – this is where the action is. This is where change agents are. This is where the future is being created. This is where true power resides. This is where God is at work.

Now if you are a bit of a cynic, as I’m apt to be, then you will quickly dismiss Luke’s claim as one of those fairy tale fantasies that people like to tell themselves to make us feel better about our own insignificance. Get real Luke - the people who will be remembered for their changes are the Zuckerbergs with their \$45 billion,² Carnegie and his libraries, Bill Gates and his technological innovations and charitable efforts. The people who will be remembered are the heads of nations, the inventors of things, Mayors of cities –that ‘s the way it works in our world. It’s why we line up to catch a glimpse of celebrities of every kind.

Despite Luke’s attempts, John the Baptist isn’t really remembered in the early historical literature. Josephus, the Jewish historian whose writings are some of the best sources for historical research about the time of Jesus makes this clear in the late first century. Josephus reports that John the Baptist was put to death by Herod even though John was a good man who had “exhorted Jews to live righteous lives, to practice justice toward their fellows and piety toward God, and in so doing to join in baptism.” In this early historical account John is remembered, but only in passing,

¹ Dennis E. Smith, “Luke 3:1-6: Exegetical Perspective” in *Feasting on the Gospels*, vol. 1, Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds., (Louisville: Westminster John

² <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/a-letter-to-our-daughter/10153375081581634/>

only as another victim of violence, insignificant next to Kings and Governors and High Priests. Get real, Luke – this is not where the action is, outside the centers of power.

But 2000 years later, if you ask people on the street what they know about Tiberius Caesar, most won't know who you're talking about. Those who recognize the name won't be able to tell you much more than the significance of his title. Herod might be the most well known of the three tetrarchs named, but only because of his relationship to John and Jesus. Caiaphas and Annas are known mostly by their mentions in the gospels. In other words, Luke was right. Two Jews – John and Jesus, insignificant by the measures of their day - are where the action was. Their deeds, seemingly insignificant at the time, were more consequential than those of the Emperor, the rulers, the high priests. The wilderness is where the action was. The place and the people hardly recognized in their time were the building blocks of true transformation.

Our own shorter-term history seems to bear this out. I can tell you few names of US Governors from the 1960s, but I remember the name of a Baptist preacher out of Atlanta who took a stand in Montgomery. The only reason I know the name George Wallace is because I know the story of Dr. King. I can't tell you the specifics of most agendas of many Presidents of the 20th century, but I can tell you about a decision by a woman named Rosa Parks that changed the nation's direction. 20 years from now, I wonder whose name is more apt to be remembered for example – Stephanie Rawlings-Blake or Freddie Gray. I can't remember the Mayor of Los Angeles during their uprising, but I remember a man named Rodney King and one sentence of truth that still resonates through today. God has a way of taking the insignificant as the starting place for action that makes all the difference.

I've been struggling these past months with the seeming insignificance of all of our work. Despite our work in the city, we have reached the highest per capita murder rate in the history of the city. Despite our work at Eutaw-Marshburn, and in the schools more generally, all measures point to a reversal of recent gains. Despite all our work in El Salvador their crimes is even worse. Despite our work in building the congregation, sometimes I wonder what difference we are making. Add to that shootings that we cannot stop, political parties that seem content to score points instead of solving problems, wars that go on without end, it's left me questioning not just the significance of our work, but the significance of my life's call.

John says that God is coming into our world. God's path to reach us, ordinarily blocked by the terrain of our world is being cleared for a God to enter.

And the reason you don't see it, the reason you're doubting the significance of your work, the significance of your life's call is that you still don't get how God enters our world. You're still chasing after a Messiah that comes as a President or a Mayor. You're still chasing after a Messiah that comes with grand designs. You're still chasing after the Messiah that rides in on the white horse, the one celebrated in action films and Disney heroes.

God doesn't enter our world like that, more often than not. God enters our world so vulnerable and seemingly insignificant that most of us don't even recognize that God when she arrives.

Which is probably why John tells his followers that the best way to prepare for the quiet arrival of this God is to learn how to value our own seemingly insignificant actions. If you've got 2 coats, share with someone who has none. If you're in a position to exploit someone else, choose instead to be fair. If you've got power, refrain from abusing others with it. Value these actions that seem so insignificant next to the giant problems that we face, and maybe you'll be in a better position to greet the God whose entry into our world begins in a small, and seemingly insignificant way.

Value the time you spend tutoring a child whose life could be change, and whose life could change your own. Value the effort you make to cross boundaries put in place to keep people apart. Value the letters you write to our representatives telling them you're tired of excuses and ready for action on gun violence. Value the time you spend listening to your children share their hopes and fears, building their resilience in a world that drunk on media screens. Value the time you spend teaching Sunday School or singing the faith. Share what you have, treat others fairly, don't abuse power in any relationship and maybe you'll start seeing mountains leveled and valleys raised up, a road made in the desert for God to arrive.

Of course I could be wrong. Luke's claim might just be one of those fairy tale fantasies that people like to tell themselves to make us feel better about our own insignificance. Salvation might not be coming to Baltimore any time soon. All flesh might not see healing and hope any time soon.

I could be wrong. But I'll tell you this. There were a lot of Emperors who ruled Rome. There were a lot of Governors who enjoyed what they thought was a lot of power during their lifetimes. There were high priests revered by the people. And I don't really know any of them – who they were or what they did. But the Jew who ministered in a small geographic area in the Middle East? The human being who died a violent death on Calvary, alone, abandoned by his friends? The one who healed the sick, cast out demons, the one who loved his enemies, and told his disciples carrying concealed weapons to put away their swords. The one who entered this world so vulnerable and insignificant that most of the people didn't recognize him? I know his name. I can't forget it.