**Luke 3:1-6**

3In 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,2during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.3He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,4as 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.5Every 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;6and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

A Promise That Is Easy to Overlook

Last week, the first Sunday in Advent, I talked about Christ’s promised coming to us as a promise big enough to save us; all of us, at some point in our lives, feel that the moon and stars are shifting, that the storm is breaking in on us, that waves are crashing around us, that our world is collapsing in on us, and that death is imminent, and nothing in this world can save us from what looks to be inevitable, final, and tragic. But amidst all of this, Jesus tells us to look up, see the Son of Man approaching, and know that our redemption is at hand. God promises us life eternal in Christ; it’s a promise that only God is able keep, and it’s a promise that is made clear in the resurrection of Jesus. It’s a promise that, quite frankly, most people think is too good to be true, but when they face circumstances that are too frightful for anything in this world to overcome, they come to see that Christ is their only hope.

Yet when, in our despair, we look up, as Jesus tells us to do, we don’t always see what we are hoping to see. We don’t see Jesus coming in the clouds; instead we just see clouds, and we wonder if Jesus is really there in the midst of those clouds.

I remember as a child how amazed I was riding an airplane. To see clouds from the top or the side was breathtaking. From the ground they all look flat, but when you get up near them you see how many are just as high as they are wide. What amazed me the most, however, was how, when ride above a storm, all you can see is clouds – you don’t see the earth below. And I used to wonder, ‘How does the pilot know where to land?” When the plane started descending into the clouds, sometimes those clouds reached all the way to the ground, and even though I could not see the runway from amidst those clouds, the pilot always seemed to be right on target. Later, as I studied science, I understood how pilots rely on instruments that give them data, so that they didn’t actually have to *see* the runway with their eyes in order to bring the plane on course for the runway. Instead they looked at gauges, little dials with arrows and numbers that led them to their destination.

Today’s Gospel reading relates to this: it’s not about seeing Jesus riding on the clouds. It doesn’t paint a picture where Jesus is front and center – in fact Jesus is not even mentioned in the reading. Like the airport runway under the clouds, Jesus is there, but he ‘s not visible to us, and like a trained pilot, we need to see him in our minds by looking at our instruments.

The evangelist Luke who wrote today’s Gospel passage is really drawing the reader into this point that we don’t always see what is important. He situates John the Baptist amidst all the “important” people who held positions of authority at the time John was preaching. It’s not the first time Luke does this: he states that John’s birth occurred “in the days of King Herod of Judah,” (Luke 1:5) and Jesus’ birth occurred during the reign of Emperor Augustus, while Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:1-3). Today’s passage dates the beginning of John the Baptist’s ministry as occurring “ 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,2during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas” Is it really necessary for Luke to drop all these names?

One might say that Luke was just trying to be professional, as a good historian, being as precise as he could be about the time of John’s ministry, but I urge you to step back for a minute. At the time that this passage was written, maybe in the late first century, the church hardly existed. The Christian faith was hardly anything more than little gatherings of people, not the major religion that it is today. Today we know names like Pontus Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas because they relate to the story of John the Baptist and Jesus; in the first century the opposite would have been true; people would have been more likely to have heard of Pontus Pilate or Herod Antipas than Jesus of Nazareth. So by dropping all these big names, Luke is telling us that somehow this eccentric preacher working in the wilderness of Palestine around a muddy little river called the Jordan is just as important, or more important, than all those rulers and emperors and high priests that held office at the time John began preaching. All these powerful, important people were doing all these powerful and important things, but all they do is overshadowed by this seemingly insignificant event: “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” Big deal? ABSOLUTELY!

And this is God’s way of doing things, taking what could easily be overlooked and showing it to be of the greatest importance. It’s the mustard seed that grows into the giant shrub, the widow’s mite that has proves more significant than the offerings of gold. It’s the nation of slaves that becomes God’s chosen people. It’s the poor, vulnerable baby born in a manger, to a mother and father with a very uncertain future, who turns out to be the Savior of the World. God takes what seems insignificant and shows us that it has the utmost significance for us. John, this eccentric, wild-eyed prophet is of more importance than any king or governor or emperor.

Such is our own experience. While governments can make decisions that affect our tax rates and personal liberty, is it government that has mattered most in your life, or is it watching your child play in a Little League game? Is it the royal wedding held in a palace with thousands of dignitaries, or is it your cousin’s wedding, with a handful of people in a little church? What we remember as the significant moments in our lives are not grand occasions on the world stage; they’re times when you felt the joy of being with the small number of people who you know and love, and who know and love you.

And it’s not generally the rich or the powerful or the scholarly or the dignified who lead you to Christ – it’s the common folk who have communicated God to you through their words and deeds, the Sunday teachers who never lost their patience with you, or the next-door neighbor who helped you look for your lost dog, or the college roommate who invited you to come to his house for Thanksgiving because your parents lived too far away, or the coworker who helped you learn the ropes of your new job, and congratulated you, even when you got promoted before she did. Isn’t it people such as these who have impacted your life the most? Wars can start or end. Economies can grow or falter, but more important than any of these events are the people close to you.

And the reason these people are so important to you is not because they hold titles or positions of power or exercise great authority like Tiberius or Pontus Pilate or Caiaphas. It’s because they are instruments of God – they are the ones who are leading you to that runway. Luke says that while all these “great” men have all these titles and rule all these lands, the word of God came to some wild-eyed Jew out in the middle of nowhere, and THIS IS WHAT IS SIGNIFICANT – NOT THESE RULERS, NOT THESE KINGS AND CAESARS AND GOVERNORS, BUT THE WORD OF GOD WHICH IS ETERNAL AND OUTLASTS ALL THE KINGS AND PRESIDENTS AND EMPERORS. The word of God comes to one man, alone in the middle of nowhere, and he starts preaching, and before you know it the word of God is coming to thousands. But it’s not spread by royal decree or legislative mandate or executive order; it’s spread by the custodian, by the plumber, by the receptionist, by the cub scout leader.

I remember watching the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.* Have you seen it? That tells you how old I am! I remember that *Indiana Jones’* father had been shot and was dying, and the only thing that would save his life was if he drank from the Holy Grail, the cup that Jesus used during the Last Supper. Indiana, with all his agility and knowledge and cleverness, had maneuvered himself through a deadly obstacle course to reach a chamber where dozens of grails lined the walls, but which one was the cup Jesus used? His enemy, in his greed, assumed that the brightest, most bejeweled and dazzling cup, the one that most suited the majesty of Christ, was the true grail. He was wrong, and the consequences of his drinking from it were predictable. Indiana Jones reasoned that Jesus, being a lowly carpenter, would have used a cup made of wood, and selected the correct grail, the most common cup from among all the gold and silver and diamond-studded chalices. He was right.

Soon we’ll be celebrating Jesus’ birthday, the day that he came to us not in royal robes but in swaddling clothes, not born in a palace but in a manger, not protected by members of the secret service but forced to flee from his country in fear for his life. Sometimes God’s promises come to us in ways that aren’t so obvious. May God grant us the sensitivity to see him and hear him in the ordinary things, in the ordinary people we meet. And may we always appreciate the fact that Jesus came to us is such an ordinary manner.