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Advent 2C
Peace, Seattle
December 6, 2009 epk
Luke 1:57-80

> God most particular, descending from generalities to show yourself in person, and speak to John the Baptizer in a particular time and place; make our love for you as particular and specific as your love for us, beginning here, beginning now, through the leveler of mountains and the straightener of crooked ways, Jesus Christ. Amen.[1]

BACKSTORY

Backstory. The term has become popular in recent years. A nobody becomes an instant celebrity, mugging before the camera for their fifteen minutes of fame, and everyone wants to know where they came from, and what series of events brought them into the limelight.

As this new church year begins we enter the year of Luke, author of two New Testament books: the Gospel that bears his name and The Acts of the Apostles; a writer who styles himself as an investigative reporter;[2] an author who believes in the power of backstory.

Luke gives us some of the best loved parables and stories of Scripture, but we are, perhaps, most indebted to Luke for the backstory he includes in his gospel, about both John and Jesus, taking us effectively *inside* the story where we watch the drama carefully unfold in intimate detail.

Today we get John's backstory…or a good chunk of it, at least.

Struck mute from the moment he expressed doubt about God's plan to give him and Elizabeth a son, Zechariah finds, upon naming his newborn son, that his tongue is freed, and immediately he begins praising God in a song of thanksgiving, a song of prophetic expectation, a song which celebrates the *tender mercy* of a God whose arc in human history leads toward light and peace.

THIS IS WHERE JOHN CAME FROM, Luke tells us, AND HERE IS THE TRAJECTORY AND PURPOSE GOD HAS PLANNED FOR HIM.

When it comes to chapter three's lection for today, then, we've got a little personal and historical context, some backstory, in which to ground our understanding of who John is.

But Luke doesn't stop there. He also gives us a snapshot of the larger SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT in which a now mature John the Baptist makes his public appearance; a snapshot that mirrors his narration of Jesus' birth in the previous chapter.

> "In the fifteenth year 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 Trachonitus, 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." [Luke 3:1-2]

Now we might wonder, *why does he include all that detail? And what difference does it make?* Well, if we're going to take what Luke has to say seriously, then it makes a big difference.

Luke anchors his story of Jesus in real time and situates the events he describes within a specific political context because he wants us to know this is not a fairytale that happened *"once upon a time."*

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[1] From Brian Wren's book, *Advent Christmas and Epiphany.* Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2008. Page 77.
[2] Check out Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-2

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He connects the lives of John and Jesus, their parents and families, to the deep traditions of Israel, to remind us that John and Jesus were not flukes, that their appearances in Judea and Galilee were not aberrations but in fact had been foretold by the prophets for centuries.

But political rulers of the day are mentioned not simply to fix the time frame of John's appearance, but also to remind us that when it comes to God's activity in human history, emperors and governments and their actions can serve the purposes of God—even without know it.

Like Cyrus the Persian centuries before him,[3] Emperor Tiberius is more than a date for the story; he is an instrument of God's will.[4]

Ultimately, the fact that Luke's dates and rulers don't match precisely with what we have learned from other historical sources doesn't diminish what he is doing here.

By tethering the stories of John and Jesus to specific times and places, Luke gives us an important lesson on how to read his gospel, and he also teaches us how to understand God's presence in our own lives.

Because, you see, our lives are full of specific facts and details.
Our stories of faith include our parents, our birth stories, where we're from, where we were baptized; the secret, silent prayers uttered by our parents to the Lord during the night; conversations, arguments, celebrations—both with our birth families or adopted families, and our church family.

These are important details. They are each lines in a drawing that have all contributed to the portrait of who we have become.

- When we witness Zechariah struck dumb for his lack of faith, we are reminded of the times we have failed to believe that God can be trusted to bring God's plan for our lives to fruition.
- When we hear the voice of John calling for repentance, we are invited to take a fearless inventory of our own lives.
- When we hear Mary's song, the *Magnificat* [Luke 1:46-55], we dare to join in singing how the pecking order of the world has been turned *"upside down and inside out"* in Emmanuel.
- When we hear the cries of a newborn child echoing from the stable, our eyes are opened again to the poor, the homeless, the refugee, the lost and forsaken in our towns and cities today.

Luke's gospel is Good News because it allows us to anchor our lives in God's story, freeing us to lift our gaze beyond the limits of our daily existence, and energizing us through the Spirit to live and love beyond the limits of our selves.

The gospel challenges us to see how Jesus' life and our own are inseparably linked with the life of our neighbors of this specific time and place. And sometimes, that challenge is truly great.

I was in the middle of preparing this sermon on Friday when the verdict in **Amanda Knox's trial** was announced. And I felt, and feel, such sorrow for her and her family and for all those involved.

Coupled with the murders of Lakewood police officers Mark Renninger, Ronald Owens, Tina Griswold, and Gregory Richards, it has been a week full of people shaking their heads and crying *WHY?*

[3] See Isaiah 45, where according to the prophet Isaiah, Cyrus the emperor was an instrument of God for the liberation and return of God's people from Babylonian exile.
[4] Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*. Interpretation Series Commentary. John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990. Page 34.

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Amanda's conviction may bring some measure of relief to Meredith Kercher's family, who supported her prosecution, but does closure ever come to parents of a murdered child?

The deaths of the four Lakewood officers, coming so closely on the heels of officer Timothy Brenton's death at the hands of a different assassin, leave gaping wounds in the lives of their families, colleagues, and friends. And we wonder how wounds as deep as these can ever heal.

Playing out so close to home,[5] these scenes of death have a great impact on us, but I can't help but think also of the servicemen and women who have lost their lives in the past eight years, as well as the Afghani and Iraqi casualties of war whose lives were equally precious to their mourning families.

Life's crooked ways endure, in spite of all the energy and resources we spend in families and communities trying to straighten things out, and after blows like the ones delivered last week, we find ourselves, once again, in that wilderness place, the place where there are no words.[6]

In such a world as ours, where news isn't news unless it's BAD NEWS**, GOOD NEWS** had better have its feet firmly anchored in real life or instead of being heard it will be summarily dismissed.

And the Good News today, as far as I can see, is that the one place we surely can count on the presence of God with us, is in the wilderness. And who is the God we meet there?

> BY THE TENDER MERCY OF OUR GOD, Zechariah sang in his newfound voice, THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH WILL BREAK UPON US, TO GIVE LIGHT TO THOSE WHO SIT IN DARKNESS AND IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH, TO GUIDE OUR FEET INTO THE WAY OF PEACE.

The God who reveals himself through John and in Jesus is a God of tender mercy.
Not a God with a club, just waiting for us to get out of line, and not a God who rolls the dice with our lives; but a hidden God, who meets us in our suffering and goes the distance with us, meeting us in our wilderness with the promise of resurrection, eager to lighten our darkness and lead us toward abundant life and peace.

Let our prayer for Amanda, for Raffael, for their families, for the Kercher family, and for the families of Mark, Ron, Tina, & Greg be, that they will experience the compassionate presence of this wilderness God, this hidden God, as they sit in the shadow of death…

…that they will experience it in the voices and touches and caring of others; experience it in their souls, where the deepest sorrows dwell and where only the peace which God gives can penetrate.

Let us pray.
God of time and history, we know that your tender compassion is meant for all your children in this whole broken down and battered world. Meet us today, in whatever wilderness we inhabit. Bring to us and to all the light and peace of your presence. Lord, come quickly, and straighten what is crooked in our lives and in our world. Bring to completion for us all the redemption for which we long, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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[5] Amanda Knox grew up in the same neighborhood which my family and I now call home.
[6] For a deeper exploration of this understanding of wilderness, see my sermon from St. Francis' Feast Day, October 4, 2009, entitled *Relinquishment*.