

Second Sunday in Advent
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius.

Just as popes choose an historical name by which they wish to be known, so the Caesars of Rome did as well. Tiberius was Claudius Caesar Augustus. His father, was Octavian, the grandnephew and adopted heir of Julius Caesar. He was simply known as the Great One or in Latin, Augustus.

When Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea...

Pilate was the fifth governor of the province and the second longest to hold the post. Judea then, was like Judea now, a difficult place to govern. He served in that capacity from 26 AD until 36 AD. His proper title was prefect.

And Herod was ruler of Galilee...

We do not have enough time and I enough space to give you a proper biography of Herod, but suffice it to say he was called Herod the Great for many reasons, not the least of which included his wealth, his conquests, his penchant for spending money, taxing the populace, building magnificent buildings and amassing many wives and concubines. He died when Jesus was a young boy. Upon his death, Caesar Augustus, the Great One, divided his kingdom amongst his three sons, Archelaus, Philip, and Antipas. Antipas is the Herod of Jesus adult years, the one who ordered the head of John the Baptist on a platter. When Jesus called called to appear before Herod after Pilate tried to wash his hands of the whole affair, this is the Herod Luke speaks of in this passage.

And his brother, Philip, ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitiis...

Iturea was the region just north of the Sea of Galilee and Trachonitis, that 370 square mile tract of land located northeast between Galilee and Damascus. A rocky yet fertile lava plain known in the Old Testament as the Land of Bashan.

And Lysanias ruler of Abilene...

Abilene was a small district 20 miles north of Damascus in modern day Syria, Lysanias never made it into any history book save the bible.

During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...

Annas was high priest when Jesus was born and held the post, whivh was appointed by the Emperor, until Ad 15. He was wealthy, one of the prerequisites for holding office, then as now, and five of his sons, as well as his son in law, Caiaphas, attained the office of high priest during their lifetimes.

The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness...

Like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth did not have a child until their old age. John the Baptist was their only son, and second cousin to Jesus on their mothers' side.

John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and quoted Isaiah, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee...

when the seat of power was Rome and the center of the Jewish world was Jerusalem, when the Caesar ruled the world as a self proclaimed god and his nearly divine representative, the prefect told his subjects when to jump and how high, when the priests held the keys to the kingdom of God and the power over forgiveness and redemption...

a new message came from God, first out of the mouth of the Baptist and then with the life and time, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Luke includes in his gospel account this information because he wants us to know that Jesus came in the midst of time, that Jesus came in the midst of life, that Jesus was born into an era, an epoch, a century, a decade, a time, a reality and that his story was not just a story by and by, but a story of a specific time and with specific people, real people. For those of us living in this time, this story of Jesus was not Peter Pan, set in some make believe *never-never* land, this story of Jesus was not a made up character to assist parents with child rearing, this story of Jesus was neither fairy tale nor legend.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius he writes to place Jesus firmly in our time and in our lives.

2000 years aside, very little has changed from that first Advent season to this one, and the call to repentance and to preparation remain a challenge to those of us who think ourselves either too far gone to be saved or too far come to be in need of salvation.

And the words that were cried in the wilderness are the same, "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." The wilderness today may look different from the wilderness that faced John but it is a wilderness none the less. In his day, John faced a world where Christ was unknown, where the hope of a Messiah merely a distant link to a past that recorded 700 years of persecution, exile, famine, slavery, death.

In our day, Christianity is now a minority religion, with denominational Christianity waning with each passing year. Christmas is a retail opportunity and Black Friday is better known than Good Friday, and the only press we get is when someone tries to post the Ten Commandments or put a manger up in a public place. Clerics are the buffoons of sit com weddings, and church is only for the naïve.

In a popular catalog that arrived at our house the other day, was a section of T-Shirts for atheists, some of whose slogans read, "At least we've never stoned anyone for what they believe or not," another read, "I won't pray in your church, please don't think in my world." While another read,

“It seems to me that the world’s religions are just fighting over who has the best imaginary friend.”

I was offended, of course, at first, until I started to think about what those sayings said about the current state of affairs within the church. What they say is that we have allowed ourselves and the message of the gospel to become trivialized. Where we spend much of our attention, and where we get attention; where we spend our money, what we fight about, at least in this generation, misses the boat with regards to what’s important.

If John the Baptist were here, if Jesus could speak to a new generation, I think they would both ask,

- “Where are the crooked paths and what have you done to straighten them?
- Have all the valleys been filled, are all the mountains of despair and the hills of hardship been made low so that those who have been walking uphill all their lives, will find the way a little easier?
- War abounds and where is the church’s message of hope and peace?
- Is repentance passé, and have we no need for reform, individually or corporately? Are we who we need to be, are we who we could be, are we who we wish to be and are we doing for one another what needs to be done so that every person is given the chance to reach their full potential without prejudice and without pity?

Until the Church addresses these issues it will continue to be relegated to the fringe of influence and true power, which only grows from true love and compassion for one another.

As a church we have been fiddling while Rome has burned and John and Jesus and our heavenly Father would have us do otherwise. There are more important things in the world

- than Tiger Wood’s car accident,
- whether or not Donny Osmond deserved to win Dancing with the Stars
- or that some publicity seeking celebrity wannabees snuck into a White House party, because while this was happening,
- 34,000 more troops were committed to be sent into harm’s way,
- people are going bankrupt trying to pay for the health care expenses,
- 13 year olds are sending provocative emails to their 8th grade classmates,
- Our state and states like California are near bankruptcy

and the church has spent the last ten years debating the sexual orientation of its pastors and whether or not a bishop from the apostolic tradition needs to be present to make an ordination valid.

Advent is the season for preparing a new way for the Lord, let us then, be about our Father’s business, and soon. Amen.