

“Grounded in History”
Dec. 1, 2024—First Sunday of Advent
First Presbyterian Church, Battle Creek
The Rev. Annemarie S. Kidder

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch 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 country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.
Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.
And all people will see God’s salvation.’”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

If you have ever forgotten an anniversary or birthday, you know there will repercussions. It will take weeks, months and probably money to get back into the good graces of the one ignored, and you learn quickly that dates do matter and that history counts.

We are creatures of history with birthdays and a past. And Christianity is just like it. It is a religion of history with distinct places in time and people that play a role. The places of birth, the historical and political conditions matter. And therefore our Gospel writer Luke gives us so much history: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, . . .” What a lengthy description to introduce us to John the Baptist, who had received the word of God! Why all this historical detail? Because God’s word comes to in a particular year, at a particular time, through a particular people.

Salvation, God moving in and through us happens with the concrete. It often starts with the baptismal water placed on our forehead, then later comes the first morsel of communion bread and the cup; and finally we hear the concrete words in worship that signal to us that God is real.

At least that’s how it was for me, and maybe it was like that for you too. As you may already know, I was baptized as a baby in the Catholic Church, had First Communion, went through confirmation, and growing up had to attend church every week. Unbeknownst to me, I was being prayed for by the faithful of the church all this time, even through the college years where I had stopped attending. Then, when I was in my early twenties, I came to this country from Germany and overwhelmed and thoroughly intimidated by the experience I sought out this little church that was right at the edge of campus. I admit, I was not pleased with its looks, for it resembled an oversize carpeted living room with styrofoam ceiling tiles and fake wood paneling—quite a contrast to the

magnificent marble-pillared structures of my German homeland. Since I couldn't stand to focus on my surroundings, I kept my eyes glued on the preacher and his words. And that's where it hit me. God, I was made to understand by him, had sent Jesus to bring me back to him. Jesus suffered for me on the cross so as to have my sins removed to allow me to commune with God. And then this: if I were the only person in this world and he hadn't yet died on the cross, he would do it just for me! That's how much God loves me, I thought. Why would I want to put him off? That's what I thought—in this humble, little church. And during the altar call, I walked forward not knowing what to expect, all wobbly kneed and shaken. . . but changed forever.

I bet you too can recount a time when you felt God's hand on you. Maybe you've not thought about it in a while. But now you can, remembering how people may have stood by you when you were in crisis. You recall the visits and the cards that were sent. You recall a sermon message or devotional, maybe just a sentence or two, and you heard a hymn whose lyrics became a catalyst for God to come within reach.

Over these past thirty years of ministry, I have met many people who call themselves spiritual but not religious. They enjoy spiritual exercises, yoga or meditation, but they reject the part that involves the church. They say "I can love God anytime and anywhere without going to church." But the Christian faith says that this isn't true. For our faith is always historical. It has a beginning in a certain place, at a certain time, with certain people, and that's how it was and will continue to be.

At a particular time and place, God decides to reveal himself. At a particular time, God chooses to use the means of this world and the form of the human body to become real. This suggests that we cannot truly know God apart from other human beings, apart from the people who believe and pray and practice his ways. And where do we find the people who believe and pray and practice His way? We find them at the place called church.

Ever since June of 1983 in that little church in Statesboro, Georgia, I have been attending church. I have worshiped with other believers, I have served with them, I have planned ministry events. There were times when I got challenged and put out by people. There were times when I got discouraged over what I witnessed or some decisions that I didn't or couldn't support. But I also have to say that the church with its people has honed away some of the rough edges and unseemly attitudes in me—with plenty of more to go.

Some years ago one of our elders asked me: "Where did you learn to love?" What a great question! Where did I learn to love. I learned it in church. I learned it through someone who forgave me my mistakes, through someone who showed me grace, through someone who offered me love.

And so we come here to this place, where the people of God are gathered, the hymns and anthems are sung, and service in his name is done. God has given us this place as our concrete road to salvation, where in "in the fourth year of Joe Biden as president of the United States and the sixth year of Gretchen Whitmer as governor of Michigan, the word of God came to the people gathered in worship at 111 Capital Ave Northeast in the city of Battle Creek." Amen.