

**Yr. C, Advent 2**  
**December 10, 2006**  
**Preached by Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Martins in the Fields**  
**1664 words**

**Lessons:**  
**Psalm 126**  
**Baruch 5:1-9**  
**Philippians 1:1-11**  
**Luke 3:1-6**

In the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, the Word of God came. May God's Word continue to be spoken, heard and done. Amen.

Let's listen again—*between* the lines—by translating St. Luke's Gospel.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> term of the Presidency of George W. Bush (who had an entire press office devoted to communications), when Mark Sanford was Governor of South Carolina (with sophisticated public relations resources at his disposal) and when Bob Coble was Mayor of Columbia with his own very gifted professional staff, and during the episcopacy of Dorsey Henderson when Philip Linder was Dean of Trinity Cathedral and Michael Bullock was rector of St. Martin's...the Word of God came to...some guy in Batesburg Leesville named John.

He was either defrocked or was a ne'r-do-well, because we know his *daddy* was a priest in the Church. This John-guy wandered around on all the back roads in central South Carolina wearing cut off jeans and a skimpy, muscle t-shirt. Let me put it this way, he is the last person that WIS-TV would hire to fill an anchor position on the 7:00 report.

But he is the *very one* that the God of heaven and earth chose to receive the Word, and more importantly to "pave the way" for the Word Incarnate, Jesus—our Lord.

Admit it. It is the most ridiculous thing you've ever heard. This strange character is trying to tell us to repent—i.e. to change our minds about what we believe and change our hearts about how we live. He's making a scene out there in the country, and I suppose he expects us to just call off our Sunday worship and go out there to have our sins washed away?

Admit it. It is not *just* ridiculous. It is offensive!

What could St. Luke possibly mean by positioning this radical who is living along the margins of the religious fringe as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy? After all, Luke was an educated man and an eloquent writer.

Luke knew that the Roman State had become an object of worship and the Emperor was the embodiment of its divinity. No Gentile would have so much as raised an eyebrow if Luke had written about the Word of God and the Emperor Tiberius in the same sentence.

And what about Herod or Philip? Their dad—Herod the Great—had rebuilt the Temple, for goodness sake. They would also be perfectly reasonable candidates to receive the Word of God.

Among Jewish hearers of Luke's Gospel, Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas, were the most obvious choices to receive the Word of God. After all, they attained the pinnacle of religious authority and held onto it for 30 years.

And yet, St. Luke parades out all of these reasonable (even obvious) candidates and then he turns the world totally upside down and points to John, the son of Zechariah.

John the Baptizer is the recipient of the Word of God, even though the Emperor, the Governor, the rulers, and the chief priests were so much more qualified to receive *and pass along* the Word of God.

And John is as untamed as the wilderness he inhabits. In short, he is a wild man.

How might we describe this Word that came to John? The “*rhma*” of God is not some innocuous, heavenly press release: it is God’s command, mandate, direction. It is God’s *action* in the world. Recall from Genesis that God *spoke* creation into being. Recall that the prologue of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel proclaims that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God.

Furthermore, this divine mandate didn’t just “come” to him in the way that a phone call or a fax might just come in from a client or a friend. What St. Luke actually wrote is that the Word of God *happened* to John. It is the same word used in Luke’s familiar narrative about Christ’s birth in chapter 2. Just like “it *happened* that a decree came forth from Emperor Augustus that all of the world should be registered,” so also “God’s mandate *happened* to John that all of the world might be ‘enrolled,’ so to speak, in the salvation of God.

Do you see that incredible parallel? God used the decree of the Emperor—the most powerful man on earth—to bring about Christ’s birth in Bethlehem. And God made his own decree with a most marginal character to announce and prepare the way for this very same Christ.

The Word of God happens to the most powerful as well as the most marginal. And since you and I fit between those extremes, it means the Word of God happens to you and me as well—whether we understand it (or even recognize it) or not.

There is another profound irony in this passage from Luke. It pertains to John as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophesy about preparing the way of the Lord and making his paths straight.

You see, it was the Romans who developed a transportation system that revolutionized trade and commerce. They developed an extensive infrastructure that linked together a vast empire.

A year and a half ago I had the wonderful privilege to walk along the archeological ruins of the primary East/West road of the ancient Roman Empire. It is called the “Via Egnatia” or the “Egnatian Way.” It cuts right through the center of Thessalonica and Philippi, two of the ancient cities along St. Paul’s missionary journeys to Europe.

Frankly, we owe no small part of the fact that we are Christians to the fact that Roman roads and the safety to travel made it possible for St. Paul to reach the Gentiles of Europe.

So did the Emperor also prepare the way of the Lord? Did Caesar help make the Lord’s paths straight? Yes—even if he didn’t understand it or recognize it!

There is an almost continuous mountain barrier between Asia and Europe. Believe it or not, at Philippi the mountains and hills are made low. The valleys are filled. The crooked Egnatian Way becomes straight and the rough, craggy steps are made smooth—literally, you can see it with your own eyes!

What is true about the topography at Philippi is also true of the spirituality of the Church at Philippi. The Word of God happened to the Philippians, and that community of believers prepared the way of the Lord and made his paths straight. You can hear it in Paul's deeply personal letter to them that we listened to earlier this morning. Let me repeat several bits of it so you can hear what it sounds like when the Word of God happens to a congregation.

Paul writes, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion...It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me...And this is my prayer, that your love may grow more and more with knowledge and full insight...through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."<sup>1</sup>

The Word of God didn't just happen 2000 years ago. The Word of God is also happening to you. Moreover, the Word of God is happening to people who don't look like you, who don't think like you, and who don't live by the same standards as you. The Word of God is happening to your dearest friends and to your most bitter enemies.

So what is the good news? The Good News is this: The Word of God is bigger than we are. It is too powerful to be wielded only by those in positions of authority. It is too beautiful to be reflected only by those who are dressed in their Sunday-best. It is too wise to be discovered only by those who think a certain way. It is too wild to be contained by one set of standards or customs. It is too loving to be limited only to those *we* can love.

And yet, when this big, powerful, beautiful, wise, wild and loving Word happens to you it is impossible to keep it to yourself. That is why John cried out in the wilderness, Paul traveled thousands of miles, and the Philippians remained remarkably faithful and generous to their spiritual leader, to Christians in Jerusalem they had never even met, and to one another.

Advent is like the wilderness around the Jordan. Advent is like the Road to Damascus. Advent is like the straight, level, Egnatian Way running through Philippi. Advent is a place where the Word of God happens to us when we least expect it as well as to those we least expect to receive it.

Therefore, we must repent—i.e. we must be willing to change our minds about God's unexpected Word, God's unreasonable action—in the world, in our nation, in the midlands, in this parish, and even in your own life.

John is crying out for us to be open to the Word of God that is happening to us. Paul is showing us—through a love letter—how to share the Word of God that is happening in us. The

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 1:1-11

Philippians are demonstrating how to be faithful and generous stewards of the Word of God that is happening in our congregation.

Dear people of St. Martin's, it is time for you and me individually, and for this congregation corporately, to follow in the way of blessed John, blessed Paul, and the Church at Philippi by preparing the way of the Lord in every way that we can so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Amen.