

Allen Pruitt  
2AdventC21  
St. Mark's, LaGrange

Most years,  
preaching this gospel reading,  
I'd run through the big names.  
*Emperor Tiberius,*  
*Pontius Pilate,*  
*and Herod;*  
*Caiaphas, the High Priest of the Temple.*  
*President Biden;*  
*Governor Kemp;*  
*Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop*  
*of the Episcopal Church.*

You know - all the famous people,  
way out there  
who make things happen.

Most years,  
I'd talk about all the big names  
and then how the Gospel turns,  
away from Rome,  
away from palaces,  
away from Emperors  
- and turns toward a man named John,  
who was out in the wilderness.  
Out in the unexpected,  
middle of nowhere.

Most years, I'd preach about the unexpected ways  
that the gospel shows up  
- not in a palace,  
but in a manger;  
not a prince,  
but a child born to an unwed mother.

The gospel IS unexpected.  
All of that is true.

But that's not ALL that's true.  
The gospel holds a surplus of meaning.

The gospel shows up in unexpected places, sure.  
But I think we are also being reminded  
that God shows up in the smallest kinds of places.

God is in the palaces  
and in the governor's mansions.

But when we pray for Joe our President  
and Brian our Governor,  
people most of us have never met,  
we also pray for Jim our Mayor,  
and our City Councilors and County Commissioners.  
We pray for all the ministries of St. Mark's.

Let's try rewording the gospel introduction this way.  
In the 6th year of *Jim Thornton being mayor of LaGrange,*  
*just after St. Joyce retired*  
*from cooking in the Meals on Wheels kitchen,*  
*at the time when Cathy Hunt*  
*was chair of the Troup County Board of Education,*  
*...the word of God came.*

I wonder if we can believe that.

    Instead of foreign,  
        important sounding names drawn out of history books,  
            Tiberius,  
            Herod,  
            Annas and Caiaphas,  
we have the names of people in our contacts app on our phones.

We have the people who worship here  
and have been here for the funeral of a good friend.

    And the word of God came right in the middle of them.

The word of God comes right in the middle of you.  
    Right here in the middle of all of us.

I wonder if we can believe that the gospel is OUR story too.

I don't always believe it.  
    But God always surprises me.  
        Every single time.

It's easy to sell our lives short.  
    We think, *God comes to OTHER people.*  
        *My problems aren't like OTHER people's problems.*

We can feel like we aren't involved,  
like we have no say in the great acts of the world.  
*What difference can I make in such a big problem?*  
*What does it matter*  
*when the politicians are going to do whatever they want to anyway?*

We might feel small and separated.

But I'm telling you,  
the Word of God comes among us,  
and if the Word of God is among you,  
then your life can never be small.

If the Word of God is among us,  
then we are drawn to the very center of things.

Just this week,  
I was on a call where the Bishop of Georgia showed up.  
That's the diocese in south Georgia,  
based in Savannah.

That area has been in the news lately.  
A very public murder trial taking place in Brunswick.

Even though that's our home state,  
we might feel very far away from those proceedings.  
We might think,  
*That's OTHER people*  
*who did those terrible things,*  
*who let their fear kill an unarmed man.*  
*That's OTHER people.*

That's certainly the way I was thinking,  
when the Bishop of Georgia started talking about his role in the trial.  
The public witness they arranged,  
being at the courthouse,  
among all the pastors there to support the family,  
to support equity in justice for all God's children.

I thought,  
*What on earth were a bunch of Episcopalians doing there?*

...Until,  
the bishop told us that all three of the men  
responsible for Ahmad Arbury's murder  
attended St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
in Brunswick, Georgia.

*St. Mark's Episcopal Church.*

One of the men was even a vestry member in the past.

Not other people.  
Us.

The Word of God does not come to other people.  
The Word of God comes to us.

The big problems of the world are not problems for other people.  
They are problems for us.

We are in communion with those three men.  
Quite literally.  
We are in the middle of it all.

The bishop shared with us that,  
not only were they praying alongside the families of the victim,  
they were also sharing messages of hope and prayer  
with the three men on trial.

Prayers for them and for their families.  
Prayers that continue,  
even after a guilty verdict.

They will find reconciliation in God's good time.  
Earthly justice must run its course,  
but God can work salvation  
in every dark corner,  
in every small place.

Which may just be what Luke's Gospel is trying to tell us today.  
We are not separated,  
not from the problems of the world  
and not from the Word of God.

We are not separated.

The Word of God can surely come to a palace  
or a temple  
or a governor's mansion  
or to the high altar of a cathedral.

But so too does the Word of God make its way to every human heart  
and into every small place.

Maybe it's just me,  
but I'd reckon most of us are sure  
that we have to do something BIG,  
something IMPORTANT,  
else God won't show up.

As if we have to *earn* God.

I can tell you,  
that I've never once *earned* God.

I've seen God at work;  
I've been privileged to witness the love of God in my life and in yours.  
But I've never earned a bit of that.

When my parents toted us around to baseball practices  
and school events,  
did I earn that?

When my grandmother made me biscuits  
and taught me how to make them,  
did I earn that?

When I showed up here in 2010  
and you let me preach to you  
and bury and baptize those you love,  
did I earn that?

*Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his path straight.*  
That's what John said to do.

*Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his path straight.*

The crooked and winding road  
is the the path of earning God.  
The crooked and the winding road  
is the way of thinking that God is far off,  
and so too are the big problems of the world.  
As if they have nothing to do with us at all.

*Make his path straight.*  
That's what we are supposed to do,  
according to John.

*Every valley shall be filled  
and every mountain and hill made low.*  
That's what God is going to do,  
according to John.

God is coming into the world.  
God is arriving in your life,  
into this place.

It doesn't have to be a palace or a great man.  
God IS arriving,  
inviting us to recognize that we are not separated,  
not from God,  
and not from the world,  
not from any part of it.



Can we believe it?

Can we believe that the Word of God  
is coming into the world today,  
saying the same thing that it has always said?

*ALL flesh,*

*shall see the salvation of God.*