

In 1977, a couple of high school buddies and I bought a ticket to a movie that was receiving some buzz. As the lights darkened in Iowa City's Englert Theater, the film opened with a frame of blue words on a black background setting up the film:

“A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . .”

Following that, there was a shot of the darkness and vastness of space. Then slowly crawling up from the bottom and receding back into the darkness and stars came the orange-colored words.

“It is a period of civil war. Rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, have won their first victory against the evil Galactic Empire. . .”

So begins the original Star Wars film. The famous scrolling text, set in front of the vastness of space, informs the viewer of the cosmic context of the story you are about to experience. A struggle between good and evil, and in the following scenes, the film moves from the big picture of the struggle to an unlikely figure, out in a desert who is instrumental in leading the rebellion, young Luke Skywalker.

I think our gospel text this morning opens in a similar fashion, big picture fashion. As you heard, Luke begins chapter 3 with a list of people that, on the face of it, seems uninspiring at best, and superfluous at worst.

It is a list of political and religious leaders in the Mediterranean basin in the 1st c. CE. Caesar, Pilate, Herod, Phillip, Lysanias, the high priests Annas and Caiaphas.

All together, they are rulers of the known world--  
the empire,  
the regional lands,  
and the religious, political, and economic complex  
that stands at the heart of Jerusalem.

“Collectively, they hold all the might and authority that wealth, military prowess, or ancestry can command.”

*Seven* rulers of the world.

Seven? That's God's number.

(From the Sabbath, the seventh day of creation, God's day.)

But here, it's ironic,

because the powerful leaders of the world

are not the ones who will do God's kingdom work.

They are NOT the ones to whom comes the word of the Lord.

Instead, God's word comes to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

The wilderness. Not the cosmopolitan cities where rulers rule,

but from the wilderness,

where space and sparsity are filled by the word of God.

Now why does Luke tell his story this way, naming the names of the powerful who rule over the known world?

Scholars agree that it anchors God's story of redemption in history, in a physical time and space. That is, the gospel story, is not just an idea, a principle. It is a historical occurrence. We name Pontius Pilate every time we recite the Apostles' Creed to anchor the Christ event in history.

But in addition to anchoring the gospel in history, we have this cinematic zooming-in effect.

Our story starts widely and sweepingly,  
and ends specifically and narrowly.

Well-known to the unknown,

powerful to the powerless,

From the numerous to the singular and unlikely,

God's word comes to

the voice crying in the wilderness,

John the Baptizer.

A little about John . . . John was born into a priestly family on both sides of his family. His father, Zechariah, was a priest who worked sometimes in Jerusalem. But, the formulaic description of John is that of a prophet, most notably in the classic prophetic formula "the word of God came to . . ."

And the new prophet, John, quotes the old Prophet, Isaiah.

You need to know that the Isaiah text that John is quoting here was written while Israel was in exile in Babylon there was a specific meaning associated

with the familiar phrases “make straight his paths straight, every valley filled, every mountain made low, and the crooked made straight.”

I don't often wish for a screen or a giant flat-screen TV in worship, but this Sunday it would be helpful. If you can picture the ancient near east you have Palestine on the left-hand side of the map, and Babylon over on the right hand of the map. They connect through the so-called “fertile crescent” of the watershed of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, whose headwaters offer a route to northern Palestine. Isaiah's prophecy tells the people to prepare the way of the Lord “in the wilderness” -- the shortcut from captivity to Jerusalem.

John is reinterpreting Isaiah. Rather than a voice saying to *prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness*, Luke has a voice in the wilderness, John, saying “*prepare the way of the Lord.*”

But if we aren't to make a path through the wilderness, as Isaiah described, **how do we prepare?** For John the answer is simple: *we repent.*

It's not actual earthmoving, leveling mountains, filling in valleys, and smoothing rough places to make a highway through the wilderness.

Rather, *we repent.* We are to do this work of “leveling” and “filling in,” “straightening the crooked” and “smoothing the rough,”  
**in our own hearts,**  
**in our own lives**  
**And, in the world.**

“Repent,” in the original Greek is *metanoia* and literally means “turn around.” Stop going one direction, do a 180-degree turn and go the opposite direction.

See from a new perspective,  
see from God's perspective.

Notice what God notices,  
care about what God cares about.

And here is what God cares about: all of creation,  
(John 3:16 says God so loved *the cosmos*), and all people,  
especially the last, the least, and the lowly,  
which after all, is what God does when God loves us, right?

As we repent, as we turn around, we need to do the hard work of self-examination.

Where are we selfish?

Where are we greedy?

Where are we judgmental?

Where are blind to the plight of others?

Where are reluctant to heed the call of God  
to work for peace, justice, and shalom?

Of course, this kind of introspection is exceedingly difficult. Ask anyone who has been in therapy. Honest, even brutally honest self-assessment is a tremendous challenge. Not only do you need to name the way that you fall short, you also need to do the work to change your behavior. That's the task of repentance.

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Tim Miller writes for and hosts a podcast called *The Bulwark*. He's a careful cultural and political commentator, and this past week he wrote this about trying to stay calm in troubled times:

“Can I be corny for a second? I mean really corny. Dad corny. Like roll-your-eyes-so-far-back-in-your-head-that-they-get-stuck-there corny.

Because here it comes.

There is one thing that does matter in this life. And it's the only thing you actually control: **Acting in accordance with your own integrity. In a way that lets you feel good about yourself.**

That's it. Everything else out there? It's chance. Luck. Atoms colliding. All you can do is make choices that align with the person you want to be in the world. **And periodically do a little self-examination to ensure you are doing right by yourself.**

Sometimes it's really hard. Painful, even. And you won't always get it right. We all fail. We have blind spots. Temptations. Pride. We convince

ourselves that something we want is actually something that is right for us.

That's okay. As long as you are still keeping tabs and trying to become the best version of yourself.

So, in short, what matters is. . . Your choices. Your integrity.”

To repeat one line:

**. . . periodically do a little self-examination to ensure you are doing right by yourself.**

That's the work of repentance. The unending work to align ourselves, with God's purposes, through humility and self-assessment.

For in the cinematic characteristic of this text,  
From the cosmic view of the powerful rulers of the ancient world  
to the word coming to John the Baptizer,  
an unlikely voice in the wilderness,

So too, today, in the face of the powerful and wealthy rulers of today,  
does the word of God come to the unlikely and the out of the way today,  
The word comes to AHLIC,  
And to you, and to me.

*God chooses you to do God's will.*

So go this week, and

“Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his paths straight.  
fill Every valley  
make low every mountain and hill  
make the crooked straight,  
and the rough ways smooth,  
and [in this way] all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

Thanks be to God, Amen.