

**December 3, 2018, in celebration of Advent 2**  
**Jane Dawson**

**Luke 3:1-6: The Proclamation of John the Baptist**

**3** In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler<sup>[a]</sup> of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler<sup>[b]</sup> of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler<sup>[c]</sup> of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup> as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: / ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, / make his paths straight / <sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled, / and every mountain and hill shall be made low, / and the crooked shall be made straight, / and the rough ways made smooth; / <sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

“If we want there to be peace in the world, we have to be brave enough to soften what is rigid in our hearts, to find the soft spot and stay with it. We have to have that kind of courage and take that kind of responsibility. That’s the true practice of peace.” Pema Chodron

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- So here we are in our second week of Advent
- I think Advent is my favourite time of the Christian year – time of waiting and preparation
- particularly strong feeling of connection with Advent and First Met
- The first time I attended a First Met service was the 9 am service on the first Sunday of Advent, in 2014
  
- And now we’re at the second Sunday of Advent
- we’ve had the lighting of the peace candle with these beautiful candles and the powerful reading from the Buddhist writer Pema Chodron where she says “if we want there to be peace in the world, we have to be brave enough to soften what is rigid in our hearts....That’s the true practice of peace.”
- “to be brave enough to soften what is rigid in our hearts” – being brave is right on the mark
- because I can feel all the ways my own heart gets rigid (busy, judgmental, resentful, scared).
- - So softening what is rigid is no small challenge
- and she says we have to do this if “we want there to be peace in the world”
- and then the scope of the challenge really hits home

- it's not just our own hearts where the trouble is
- we don't have to look very far to see that it's not a very peaceful world.
- I recently saw a headline from 2014 saying that there were only 11 countries in the world that weren't involved in some kind of armed conflict – (11 countries – 195 countries/ 5 or 6%)
- not a very good score -- now here we are four years later,
- maybe the numbers and countries have jiggled around a bit, but we are still a long way from a world at peace and not likely to become one anytime soon
- maybe that's because the opposite of peace isn't only war
- in some ways the opposite of peace is power – not that power is bad itself, we need power structures in society to ensure that things get done, the good exercise of power is absolutely necessary to have good systems of social order
- but it often seems we don't have peace because the good exercise of power isn't happening – the people who have power are exercising it badly, and the systems of power are serving the interests of the powerful few
- that imbalance of power where people refer to as “empire” —where empire means the whole structure of society has a few people at the top holding almost all the power and just about everybody else feels powerless and many are oppressed in that structure.
- I could list examples (from ancient times on up) and maybe you have some in mind yourself
- instead, I want to read you a poem about empire that serves as a bridge between that quote by Pema Chodron about peace and softening our hearts, and what we heard in the passage from Luke just now.
- Poem is by Mary Oliver, a contemporary American poet
- mostly she is known as a nature poet where she writes beautifully about how the holy is alive in nature, but this one has a quite different tone, where she has some rather bracing things to say about the state of the world we're in. The poem is called “Of the Empire”

*“We will be known as a culture that feared death / and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity / for the few and cared little for the penury of the / many. We will be known as a culture that taught / and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke / little if at all about the quality of life for / people (other people), for other species, for rivers. All / the world, in our eyes, they will say, was a / commodity. And they will say that this structure / was held together politically, which it was, and / they will say also that our politics was no more / than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of / the heart, and that the heart, in those days, / was small, and hard, and full of meanness.”*

*“They will say that our politics was no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, and that the heart, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness.*

- Not a lot of softening what is rigid here is there, not a lot of peace.

- but when we turn to the scripture passage, the words of Luke, they do seem kind of fitting.

The passage starts off with this long list of people holding power around the time when John the Baptist came onto the scene.

Some people love this passage because it's very historical, it names real people, at a real time in history (about 29 AD). But I find it fascinating not just because it puts things at a time in history, it also very specifically names who the big power holders were at that time.

- So let's go through that list:

- "in the fifteenth year of the reign of the emperor Tiberius

- when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea

- and Herod was ruler of Galilee

- and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis

- and Lysanias ruler of Abilene

- during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas"

- all these rulers, seven of them, religious leaders right in there with the political elite

- and there it is, the apparatus of politics in 29 AD spelled right out – and even though we may not recognize all these names, the ones we do know (and the people of those times would have known even more) – Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas – aren't names of the good guys.

These names don't conjure peace, they conjure exactly what Mary Oliver says -- "a 7-layered political apparatus reflecting a heart that, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness.

- so we've got this big, mean apparatus of Empire that Luke spells out.

- and then against all that we get John the Baptist. "the word of God came to John" – just John, no land, no empire, no power, no position, just John, son of Zechariah (who we know from a few chapters earlier in Luke is a kind of village priest – very pious, but not really anybody compared to all those big names) –

- and where is John, compared to all these people in positions of power?

- he's in the wilderness -- "the word of God came to John in the wilderness."

- he's in the place, in other words, where all of those people in power are not

- the wilderness in those days (and even now) is a place outside of the rule of empire

- the wilderness is outside the boundaries where the big apparatus of power holds sway

- it's not that there isn't power there

- but the power there is a whole different kind of power to all those rulers

- as though Luke is turning away from that apparatus of corrupt human power to where the real power is

- it's here, in this wilderness – in this desert place – where the word of God comes to John, and John calls for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and he quotes from the prophet Isaiah to "prepare the way of the Lord, to make his paths straight"
- "prepare the way of the Lord" – such a famous phrase
- he doesn't say anything yet about the One who is to come after him (that comes later)
- what's interesting here is where John puts the emphasis.
- it's not God who's going to prepare the way and make the paths straight
- it's the people coming to the wilderness – stepping away from that big apparatus of power – who are being asked (in fact commanded) to do the preparing and straightening – you prepare the way of the Lord, you make the Lord's paths straight
- so how?
- in this passage John doesn't say, although if you read ahead, his is asked this very question and gives some answers. I would say those answers are not far off what we heard from Pema Chodron when we lit the peace candle: *"If we want there to be peace in the world, we have to be brave enough to soften what is rigid in our hearts, to find the soft spot and stay with it. We have to have that kind of courage and take that kind of responsibility. That's the true practice of peace."*
- As I said earlier, easier said than done.
- It's like what Mary Oliver said in her poem: that we can end up adoring power for all the wrong reasons, and end up with an apparatus of power "that accommodates the feelings of a heart that is small, hard, and full of meanness. //
- But are we stuck there?
- Well, here's the thing I think is most interesting about that poem (and how the poem relates to John's message in the wilderness)
- in one way it's kind of a bleak poem, a negative appraisal of our times
- but in another way it is a poem that has absolute faith in the future // that we can prepare, that we can be brave enough to soften what is small and hard and mean in our hearts.
- because it's written from the perspective of future generations -- in the past tense.
- "we will be known (in some future time) as a culture that adored power and the amassing of things" – it's written imagining a future time that looks back at a time (in those days) when the heart was small and hard and full of meanness – but is no more
- it speaks of a future where we have listened to that voice in the wilderness, where we have prepared the way of the Lord, we have made his paths straight, and we have, as the passage ends, "seen the salvation of God."
- gone from an apparatus of power made by small, hard hearts, to one made by hearts open
- So how do we get to that future?
- One way, at least a place to start, is that we do the challenging but brave things we recited when we lit the peace candle at the beginning of the service.
- that we do find the soft spot in the pressures of the season

- we do stay with it as we discern our way forward
- we are filled with loving kindness and at ease
- we do discover the true practice of peace within us
- so that in this way there is peace in the world.

Amen