

Second Sunday of Advent (December 8-9, 2018)  
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael Renninger

“How was your Thanksgiving?”

Lots of people have asked me that question in recent days. I've asked folks that question as well. “How was your Thanksgiving?”

People respond, “It wasn't so bad – except for I-95!” Others say, “I ate too much!” Other tell me how glad they were to see their grandchildren – and how glad they were to see the grandchildren leave!

The other day I asked a friend, “How was your Thanksgiving?” He rolled his eyes. Apparently, his rambunctious uncle, who likes to stir things up, asked in the middle of dinner, “So what are we going to do about Pelosi, Schumer, Warren and Cuomo?”

The Republicans around the table groaned. For them, this was a list of ‘deplorables!’ Someone else at the table said, “What are we going to do about Trump, McConnell, Ryan and Kavanaugh?” Things got ugly, until grandma threatened punishment to anyone who brought up politics again.

Interesting, isn't it? Just make a list of political leaders, and people will groan. But you'll only groan if you know who the leaders are, and what they stand for. If someone completely unfamiliar with American politics was at that Thanksgiving table, they wouldn't know who any of those people are!

Today's Gospel begins with a list of names. Names of political leaders. But many of us don't know who they are. Listen again to the list in Luke's Gospel:

*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 tetrarch of the region  
of Ituraea and Trachonitis,  
and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,  
during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...*

You may have asked yourself, “Why do we need to hear this list of boring Biblical names?”

Why didn't Luke just say: “the word of the Lord came to John?”

Well, to the people who first heard this Gospel, these names *meant something*. Saint Luke records all of these names because his first listeners would have heard the names and *groaned* – not out of boredom, but out of *disgust*.

The people named by Luke were *terrible leaders* at a time when ancient Israel was *suffering*. They are names connected to one of the darkest periods in Jewish history.

Luke begins... “In the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Tiberias Caesar.” Tiberius was the Roman emperor. The Romans had occupied the Jewish homeland, and destroyed Jewish freedom. When people heard that name - Tiberius! – they thought of the awful leader of that awful empire who conquered our home!

Luke continues... “when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea...” Pilate. You know him! He had Jesus crucified! What you may not know is how awful he was to the Jewish people as whole. He stole money from the temple in Jerusalem. He arranged the murders of Jewish leaders. A terrible Roman leader, at a terrible time.

Herod and Philip. Awful! They were Jews who were collaborating with the Romans! Herod and Philip were puppet Jewish kings, propped up by Roman armies. They stole tax money from their Jewish neighbors, seized their land. Herod and Philip sent the wealth of the country to Rome, in exchange for power. They were working with the enemy. *Groan*.

Tiberius. Pilate. Herod. Philip. If you asked Jews and Christians of the first century to name the worst leaders of the worst period in recent memory, that’s the list of names they would give you!

In other words, imagine if I started a religious story like this:

**In those days, when Richard Nixon was in charge of honesty, and Bill Clinton was in charge of chastity, and Hillary was in charge of email security, and Hitler was in charge of religious freedom, and Castro was in charge of human dignity, and Donald Trump was in charge of hair care....**

*You get the idea.*

Why do we listen to Saint Luke’s list of biblical names? Because it’s Luke’s way of saying something like this:

*In those days, when we had lost our home, and foreign powers were occupying us, and strangers sought to destroy our way of life... in those days, when even our own political leaders seemed to*

*be making things worse... in those days, when the suffering was overwhelming, and the fear and anger were palpable, and hope seemed foolish...*

In those days, when it was *darkest*... it was then – THEN! – that the word of the Lord came to John the Baptist, saying, “Get out there and do something! Get out there and say something! Tell the people that *God* is going to do something, but it’s going to require that the people cooperate, and change their hearts, and change their ways. The savior is coming – *help* is coming – but the arrival of that help requires human participation and action.”

When it was *darkest*... the word of the Lord came.

When it was dark... back then. Is it dark, now? Is there darkness in your life, now? Does it feel so dark, that you are not sure how to hope?

Well, hold on to the fact that God is consistent. God acts with great consistency in every century.

So, we must remember how God intervened in the dark and hopeless days of Tiberias and Pilate and Herod and Philip. When it was darkest, the word of the Lord stirred in John the Baptist, and God said, “I am going to bring light in the darkness, I am going to bring hope to the hopeless and help to the frightened... but that means that everyone who HEARS the word of God must be willing to DO something with it!”

That’s how God did it back then, when those folks were the leaders. That’s how God is doing it now, when the names of the leaders have changed. But the world’s troubles seem just as dark.

Many of us feel burdened, these days, with a sense of concern, or fear, or frustration. How do we solve the world’s problems? How do we address the issues which burden us? How do we experience freedom from sin and justice for all? How do we create a *better* world for our children and grandchildren?

And how do we do that in a time when political leaders – on every list - seem so divided, and disoriented, and out of touch?

John the Baptist was listening... listening for the Word of the Lord. And he heard it precisely in the darkest time. And he knew he had to act.

There is no way for a Christian to find light in the darkness without daily prayer.

Prayer enables modern Christians to listen to the Word of the Lord. But prayer *itself* is the first, foundational step. Prayer is the communication by which Christ will tell us what role he wants

each of us to play in the transformation of the world.

So if we pray about *what's going on in the world* – if we pray about *anything* – we'd better be ready to hear the word of the Lord when Christ says to us, “I am going to fix it... and here's how you are going to help me.”

In *those* dark days – of Tiberius and Pilate and Herod and Philip – the word of the Lord came.

In *these* days – of ISIS, and violent people, and angry people, and frustrated people – the word of the Lord comes.

Jesus Christ IS the word made flesh. He knows what we need. If you listen, you will hear. If you pray, he'll be near.

But do not pray...unless you're willing to *act*... in *these* days, in *this* time, in *this* Advent.

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