

Aren't name droppers irritating? You, know those people who insert into every conversation the important people they have met, or presented with at a conference, or know socially. To me, it feels like they are trying to impress me, or make me feel less important because I don't run in the same social circles.

At first glance, it might seem like the author of Luke is up to the same trick as the first sentence in today's Gospel lists not one, not two but seven of the most prestigious, important, and powerful men of the time. Their names represent not just power and prestige; combined these men held ALL the political, economic, military, and religious power in Jerusalem. These were the elite, the influencers, the billionaires going into space of their time.

Before that long first sentence in our Gospel reading ends, the author of Luke drops two more names: John the son of Zechariah, who is also known as John the Baptist. We might not think John belongs with such illustrious company, but by virtue of his ancestry, he did. You see, both John's father and his mother were born in the priestly class, which made him part of that same class. In this time, being a priest in the Jewish religion was less about hearing a call from God and more about what class you were born into; similar to how some people are born into the wealthy class today. Because both of his parents were from the priestly class, John was supposed to follow in his father's footsteps and should have been up to whatever men in that class got up to in the temple in Jerusalem, adding his name to the list of important people.

But that is not where we find him in today's Gospel. Instead, we learn he was not anywhere important doing anything impressive; he was in the wilderness.

This detail tells us something extraordinary about John. That he had rejected the class he had been born into. He had walked away from being important in order to walk in the wilderness.

In the Bible the wilderness is more than an area outside of a city. The wilderness is theological ground, it evokes images of the journey God's People made from slavery in Egypt to the promised land. Wilderness is an intentional place God sent people to learn how to depend not on the important, nor the political, nor their own ability to survive on their own, but where people learned to depend on God. The wilderness was a place to renew relationship with God.

This is significant because it was to the man who eschewed his birthright, the prestige of working in the temple and hanging out with the powerful, that the word of God came to. The word of God did not come to those wealthy, powerful men of privilege. The word of God did not come to the ruling class. It came to the guy in the wilderness, the person who believed all the illusions of power and status are not important to God.

Perhaps the author of Luke's Gospel wasn't name dropping when they listed all those names and places in the first sentence of today's Gospel reading. Perhaps they were doing something much more Biblical by introducing us to the last prophet in the style of the Old Testament. In the books Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Isaiah we read similar introductions of other Old Testament prophets. Prophets played a vital role in the Bible, they were the people God called on to give the difficult to hear message to God's People that they were failing to follow God's ways, they had gone astray, and were following their own selfish desires or blindly following the politicians, social influencers, or billionaire celebrities of their day. The prophets called the people to repent, to change their ways, to return to following God who was eager to welcome them back. Sometimes the people listened, sometimes they didn't, and most of the time, prophets met with resistance, rejection, and sometimes were killed.

By the time of John, there had not been a prophetic voice from God in hundreds of years. There was the belief prophecy had died out, but the faithful still hoped such a voice would return, and when that time came, God would renew God's covenant with God's People once again. This hope was fulfilled when the word of God came to John in the wilderness.

We heard John received this word and began to spread it around, preaching repentance, preaching change, because God was going to keep God's promise that all the things that prevent people from seeing the salvation of God, those things poetically described as valleys or mountains and rough roads will be filled in, made low, or smoothed out. In other words, whatever made God inaccessible, God will make accessible. It also means those hierarchies represented by the names of the powerful in today's Gospel will be overturned, not by zealots, but by God. And what it means to be important will also change.

It is a promise God kept in Jesus, and this same promise will be fulfilled when Jesus returns. This is the hope we remember during the season of Advent. A season that belongs to John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet who prepared the way for God to work God's love into the world in a new way. Before Jesus, before Mary and Joseph, before the angels, we have a man in the wilderness. One who doesn't look very important to others, but who God chose to do the important work of preparing for the new thing God is up to.

Perhaps one of the hopeful messages of Advent is when we have no names to drop and feel unimportant, or worry for the people the world overlooks, John's voice continues to cry out like one from the wilderness reminding us those are the very same people who matter to God and may be the very people God is working through to restore all creation to God's love.