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Not in These Film Credits
Isaiah 49:13-23 & Luke 3:1-6

You walk into your screenwriting class one day and the professor hands out the assignment. On the papers are the words of Luke 3:1-20. I know I just read verses 1-6, but most of the rest of the verses are the gospel reading for next Sunday. Only the papers you have been given have just the words, no chapter or verse numbers and no mention that it is from the gospel of Luke. The assignment is to develop the plot line and characters for a movie based on these verses.

My guess is that most of you would be pretty sure that you had heard of Emperor Tiberius and Pontius Pilate; and maybe the names of Herod and Philip, Annas and Caiaphas, John, but which John, and Zechariah could be familiar. The man Lysanias would be a different story for almost all of us. If his name was in a list of 20 names, that also included the others already named, and we were told to group them by time periods, I am not sure I would even get all the rest of the names read, let alone Lysanias, in the proper time grouping.

And even though John the Baptizer is the most frequently referred to person in these verses, most of the class members likely would create some scenes around the other characters to spice up the plot with some royal pomp and intrigue. Most definitely, though, you would have to create the scenes with John. You cannot ignore him in this passage. Likely you would create fictitious tax collectors and soldiers for specific dialogue with John. And when the credits rolled by at the end of the movie, the actors and actresses with the above specific parts would have their names listed. My guess is that, if we had parts in this movie, most of us would be the unnamed faces amongst the crowds and the people, or the soldiers and tax collectors with no speaking parts. We would not be listed in the film credits. We would have had our parts to play, but we would disappear from the scene, scenes, and movie as unnamed characters in the vast history of time.

As you recall the verses read, remember who it is who John went to, who it is that came to John - not Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Philip, Lysanias, Annas or Caiaphas; though they may have sent small delegations to keep an eye and ear on this John. No. They just set the historical context and framework for John, his work, and God's acting in history. It has been written that "Tiberius ruled the Roman empire from about 14-37 AD; Pontius Pilate enforced Roman rule in Judea; Herod Antipas ruled Galilee in the north; and the Romans controlled who was appointed to the high priesthood, since this was the most powerful religious, cultural and financial role of the subjugated province." No, it was not to these that John came. It was to the crowds and the people, those living through the in-between times of their lives and of history, as we know it, that John came, preparing the way for the Lord. And that is the way it would be today. The President and leaders of other nations, Senators, Governors, the Pope, Archbishops, Bishops and Presidents of denominations would be named just to set the historical context for a present day script.

But whoever John the Baptizer would be in today's world would be someone in a backwater country, region, state or county, speaking primarily to the crowds, to the peoples of that area. We probably would only be aware of this present-day John because of the ways we can quickly receive

news. And we might give him some notice, depending upon what else and who else was in the news that hour, day or week. Who knows whether we would consider him on the lunatic fringe, a guru of some sort, some religious zealot, or a true prophet of God? With what we are living through each day, who knows how receptive our hearts and minds would be to his message, whether we would consider it truly be God's word or the words of some misguided soul.

Robert V. Dodd has written most of the following:

In the past few years we have experienced the election of a new president; extended military conflicts; terrorist threats and attacks; the downward spiral of our economy; alarming stock market losses; a housing market downturn; wage cuts, companies downsizing, the loss of jobs; the failure of major banks and financial institutions; the possible demise of the big three American automakers; rising unemployment; a lack of affordable medical care and people with no or inadequate health insurance; health crises that we, family members and/or friends must deal with; the death of loved ones and friends; so much more happening in other countries that directly impacts our lives; increased demands on social service agencies; political scandal, greed, violence, crime, mistrust, and increasing incivility overwhelming us; as well as dealing with all of the changes and pressures of our lives in the workplace, at home, at school, with family and friends. No wonder we are a people who are distressed, discouraged, angry, afraid, and in need of genuine encouragement.

It was into a time, not that dissimilar from ours, that John the Baptizer appeared. Living in a country oppressed by a foreign power, with an ever widening gap between the rich and the poor, with divisions and hostility amongst themselves driving the people further apart into more distinct and entrenched camps, John came to "prepare the way of the Lord, ... that all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

With all the daily, weekly, and monthly stuff of our lives that pulls and pushes, rips apart or builds up our lives, the tensions and enjoyments & the sorrows and pleasures we live, the mix and muddle of the in betweenness of our lives, we are still called 'to prepare the way of the Lord,' to give unto others, to live our lives as followers of Jesus the Christ, to share God's love with others, as we look forward to celebrating again the birth of Jesus and anticipate his second coming. So much of this giving and sharing is being done by you all the time: praying; spending time with family or friends in a time of need; changing your schedule to respond to a crisis; volunteering; fund raising; serving at church or at other places in the community; responding to appeals to meet the pressing needs of others; and so much more.

I had the pleasure of assisting 3 others of this church in preparing and serving a meal to the homeless at the Helping Hands shelter on Friday night. These men and women came back for seconds and thirds. And their words of thanks and gratitude truly made all the work, the cooking from scratch the other 3 did, worthwhile. We had become a bright spot for these folk who are really living in the in-between times in their lives. So many of you can tell similar stories.

Now I am not going to ask for a show of hands on the following questions – so just think of your answers: How many of you have tattoos? How many of you personally know others who have tattoos? Does it matter to you when you see others in person or on the media with tattoos? Well, I do not have any tattoos, I do know some folk who do, and I usually respond negatively when seeing tattoos on other people, most usually on athletes such as the soccer superstar, David Beckham, or college and professional basketball and football players, or on other celebrities.

When we were serving the folk at Helping Hands on Friday, there was one man who had on a short sleeve t-shirt, so many of his tattoos were visible. My initial response was thinking – Why did you want to have all those visible tattoos put on your body? I just don't understand this. But I came to the conclusion that this kind of thing is a personal decision and generally does not reflect on a person's civility, kindness & caring, and one's personality. Tattoos should not be the basis on which I judge another person.

I am obviously not part of a culture, even a subculture, where this kind of body art is the norm, or is desired and admired, or is a sign of distinction. It can be just amazing, or it can be disgusting – depending upon the expressions of and in the body art – when one views pictures of those who are members of these cultures or subcultures.

Those of you who daily read the *These Days* daily devotions might now be remembering the devotion from December 1, where the author, the Rev. Thom Shuman, used the Isaiah 49 passage read earlier as the basis for that devotion. He wrote: “From the early image of God as that white-haired gent who might trip over that long beard, to a hippie, a woman, an African dancer, a Latino guitarist, my images of God have evolved over the years (thank God!). But a God who looks like Bradbury's *Illustrated Man*? Hardly.”

As an aside, as I had to look up this reference – ‘The Illustrated Man’ is a 1951 book of 18 science fiction short stories by Ray Bradbury that explores the nature of mankind. While none of the stories have a plot or character connection with the next, a recurring theme is the conflict of the cold mechanics of technology and the psychology of people. The unrelated stories are tied together by the frame device of ‘the Illustrated Man,’ a vagrant with a tattooed body who the unnamed narrator meets. The man's tattoos, allegedly created by a woman from the future, are animated and each tells a different tale.

And as a further aside, what came to my mind when reading the devotion was a man known now as Cat Man. Google him to find his pictures. He was the first person I remember seeing in person whose body was covered with body art, all done to make him help think of himself as a cat and to look like a cat. He since has gone on to have more body art and surgery done on his body, especially his face, to make him truly look like a cat. I encountered Cat Man in an airport in London. I had been with the choir of the John Knox Church of Indianapolis on a tour of Scotland and England. We were waiting for our return flight to this country, and Cat Man was waiting there as well. Basically, everyone was avoiding this most different individual, though it was hard not to keep looking over at him to try and take in all of what one was seeing.

That is, except for one woman in the choir. She was not put off by him. Rather, she went up and sat down next to him and engaged him in conversation as if there was nothing really different about him, even as she asked lots of questions about who he was and why he looked as he did. For her, he was another child of God, who just happened to have the most unique look to him. On these words from Isaiah 49, 'See, I have inscribed, engraved, you on the palms of my hands; I have written your name on the palms of my hands;' Rev. Shuman writes, "Yet this is precisely the image that Isaiah popped into my head one Advent, of God covered head to toe with our images, our names, us! Your name engraved on the back of God's hand, the God who gives thanks for you every time grace is said. Your face is etched on God's wrist, so when God checks that Chronos, God is reminded of you. No wonder God says we are never forgotten!"

So it truly does not matter that our names most likely will never be in the credits of any film. What matters is that in all of the in-between times in which we live, God came to earth to share God's self with us in God's Son, Jesus of Nazareth, and that God intends for there to be a 2nd coming of Jesus. What is amazing is that this God knows and loves each one of us so much that our names, faces and souls, our very selves, are God's body art, engraved upon God's very self so that we are always part of God, never to be forgotten and always to be loved.