

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Sunday, December 8, 2025

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 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.
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;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

My first big job out of college was to be music director at St. James Episcopal in Manhattan. The music committee chair was a brilliant and formidable woman. At first I was a little bit frightened of her, but we became really good friends: good enough friends that when her nephew was going to be getting married, she wondered if I would do a phone consultation for him to choose his wedding music. I wouldn't be able to play since it was going to be in Washington, DC but I was happy to talk with him and so we got on the phone and he said, "Would you mind if we include my future mother-in-law in the conversation?" And I said, "Of course, I'd love it." And so she joined the conversation and we were chatting and we did that first exchange of pleasantries and got the setting established; I learned some names and processed just enough details that I realized that my friend's nephew's future mother-in-law was Tipper Gore. Interesting! Of course that's a detail that might conceivably have been shared before going into the conversation, but it was just fine and she couldn't have been more delightful and friendly, and we had a great conversation. We finally got around to music and the request was made for some American music, which which certainly seemed fitting given the setting. Many of the folks who would be attending were involved in the United States government. We talked about possible choices and I thought of two beautiful old American songs for the singer who they'd asked to sing. And that was that and all was well and I didn't think much more about it until, because this was a wedding within the the Gore family, there was some coverage of it in the news, which I happened to read a couple of months later, and that's when I learned that the singer had been Aretha Franklin. Again, a detail I might have been interested to know when we were doing the planning. So far as I know, it was a success and she did her usual unmatched job singing. But, you know, it's just another reminder for me that details do matter.

And in fact, if this were one of those old-fashioned Protestant churches in the countryside with a board out in front that broadcast the name of each Sunday sermon, it would have said **Details Matter**. That's the theme of my sermon this week because, as we heard in this morning's gospel, details appear to matter very, very much to Luke! This is one of those gospels that is so filled with detail that as the gospel-reader you want to make sure you study it ahead of time, perhaps

rehearse some pronunciations. Details really matter to Luke. His gospel is the longest of the four and it's packed filled with fine detail that can strike us as a bit more than necessary. Why do details matter so much to Luke? As it turns out, the answers are so beautiful and so relevant to to day and to this season and where we are in our world, that with the few minutes I have, I'll share a couple of them.

☞First of all, Luke makes it very clear at the very beginning of his gospel that details matter to him: that he's going to offer clear, clarifying details and that he's going to offer an accurate record of what really happened. One can tell even within the first few sentences that Luke's project is to record *the truth* — a clear historical telling of the received, authoritative story of Jesus with verifiable markers along the way in case any would doubt. Luke's approach, unique among the evangelists, reflects the fact that Luke compiled his gospel a couple of generations after Jesus was here with us and beliefs about Jesus were starting to circulate that deviated significantly from the apostolic faith. Luke needed to set set the record straight. Among the ideas circulating? Jesus was not human; his body was nothing but a shell. In a faith who's centerpiece is *life in the redeemed body*, Luke needed to correct that! And so when we read the Gospel of Luke, we see Jesus eating and drinking regularly, a detail that might strike us as odd until we remember Luke's project. Human beings eat. Human beings drink. The divine one who is fully human needs to eat and drink. And Luke shares stories accordingly, including memories of moments where Jesus was even accused of eating and drinking *too much*.

Luke had to fight another idea. Some with influence claimed that Jesus came to bring his message of good news to a select few, and that he shared this good news as secret information to them and only them. Of course, for Luke, that was not only false, but dangerous, and he had to set the record straight. This was good news for all. For everyone in an ever-expanding family. And so, in a long passage that can read at first like rather dull detail, Luke walks through all the generations leading up to Jesus. It's at the end that see why he included it. Luke traces Jesus's genealogy not just all the way back to Adam but *all the way back to God* and thereby makes a very special and essential point: we are all part of this family, not just a select few! Details matter to Luke. We are all part of this family and moreover, and here's where we want to land this: We are all family, all inheritors of God's kingdom reality, come now in Jesus, towards which all of God's story, toward which all of our history *in every detail* has pointed. More than anything else, Luke shows us that God's work of love, mercy, truth and reconciliation of all in all is work *in time, over history, in every detail*.

And so it is toward this kingdom vision that Luke points all the way through his gospel. This is his ultimate and unique project. It's in Luke that we will see rich detail such as the disciples Susanna, Joanna and other women followers absent from the other gospels. Why is that? Luke isn't simply trying to be inclusive. He has a more ultimate and urgent project: He's showing us that God's long-anticipated kingdom of mercy, justice and truth has arrived in Jesus. He writes to folks who are frightened. They're living in the dark. They wonder what's become of God's promises. Luke's message in this gospel working through history is to say: God's promises are real, God's promises are fulfilled and God's promised kingdom is now. God has come through. God has come through in Jesus, in whom the kingdom has come. And for clear, historical evidence of that kingdom, Luke shares vignettes that reflect it its fulness, already here in Jesus. In Luke, where there's a male who speaks, who offers authority, who bears witness, there's a woman who does as well; for

Zechariah, there's Elizabeth; alongside Simeon is the prophet Anna. That's detail that matters! God's promised kingdom is here and now! All the way through his gospel, Luke shows us in detail that the kingdom has come as distinctions so common to Rome and still so common to our world based on caste and rank and status no longer have meaning. That's not of God or of God's kingdom. And Luke makes his urgent and passionate case in the details. Details matter to Luke.

And so finally, what does Luke show us today on this Second Sunday in Advent? What will he be showing us next week in this season of increasing light as he shows us God's loving, sustaining, redeeming work through history? Luke wants to show us that God's message of liberation has been proclaimed and continues to be proclaimed *in history*. And so we will hear from Isaiah that, yes, every valley will be exalted, all valleys lifted high, each mountain brought low in a restored kingdom where there are no rich and poor, where there is no high and low, where there are no insiders or outsiders; where we are one, where our shared and eternal and one true lineage traces not only back to Adam but to God. We are **one** in Luke, and Luke's historical record filled with rich, loving detail shows us that yes, indeed, God's promise is real, eternal and unchanging. God's got this, Luke, assures us, just as God always has. Isaiah's rock-certain message of liberation, redemption, and release is now John the Baptist's message as it will be Elizabeth's and Mary's. Luke's detail speaks a potent word of hope to a frightened and bewildered world. The world is unjust; we long for God's justice, and Luke longs for us to know that it is here. The Lord is come. The kingdom *has come*. The kingdom has come in Jesus who liberates, sets free and restores us to the God who loved us into being and who now welcomes us — all of us — home.

Thanks be to God. Amen.