

There's an audacity to today's Gospel reading that's easy to miss. It all starts with the gospel writer's penchant for placing his narrative amid the historical figures of the day. Luke writes as a historian. Not, mind you, as a historian of the 21st century; but, rather, of the 1st century.

Back then you wrote history to make a point, to teach a truth, to draw people into the community story. And, that's what Luke is doing here: placing the beginning of the Christian story — a story that now defines, encourages, and challenges his community of faith into the history of the world.

Last Sunday I spoke about how the whole Bible alludes and points to God's promise of salvation. From the Fall in Genesis through Revelation, one can see how God's love shaped a people, calls us to live new lives, adopt a different worldview, and hold to that promise even in the midst of grief and trial. And, while it seems too fantastic to be true, our faith, that certain trust, brings us to believe it.

Now Luke calls us to narrow our focus a bit, to locate this divine drama amid the major actors of the world stage. He's actually done this earlier in his telling of the Gospel story. The first time was at the birth of John the Baptist "in the days of King Herod of Judah" (1:5). Next is the birth of Jesus himself that takes place under the rule of Emperor Augustus and while Quirinius was governor of Syria (2:1-3). Now, (as we would say in Texas) John is fixing to start his ministry, and Luke again places his story amid

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historical figures.

Why does he do this? Because, as we would have said when I was a kid, he's got guts. He makes bold, in Biblical-style language. That is to say, that these events — about as small and insignificant as one can imagine — deserve to be placed alongside the world-shaking people and events of the day. "Really," Luke dares his readers to ask, "what does the birth of two small children or the ministry of a misplaced prophet have to do with kings,

emperors, and governors?” His reply: “Everything!”

This is the way it is with the Gospel — it seems so small, it’s easy to miss. More than that, God’s mercy comes disguised as human weakness — two vulnerable children who will grow up to change the world, an instrument of Roman torture turned into the means by which God reconciles the world unto His own self. Yes, there’s always something of the mustard seed about the Gospel — it creeps in, unawares, small and insignificant, until it grows and spreads, infesting whole fields and inviting all kinds of creatures to take refuge in its branches. (Wait, I think I just described kudzu rather than mustard)

So Luke begins his story by making of the outrageous claim that God is at work in the weak and the small — babies and barren women and unwed teenage mothers and wild-eyed prophets and executed criminals — to challenge the world. And, to be quite honest, God’s not done yet. God continues to work through unlikely characters today — unpopular teens and out-of-work adults, corporate executives and stay-at-home parents,

underpaid secretaries and night-shift workers, police officers and volunteer youth sports coaches, even weathered teachers and preachers — all to announce the good news of God’s redemption.

It’s a promise, as I said, that’s easy to miss, but when we hear it, and even more, when we see it taking place in our own lives and in the lives of those around us, it changes us along with the world.

So let me invite you to ponder how God’s miracle, so easy to overlook, has touched your life, how this outrageous claim that the “word of the Lord” came to this nobody named John in that no-place called the wilderness and that that small and insignificant thing is more important than all the important people and events of the day — then and now, and how these seemingly trifling events of 2,000 years ago (at least to the world’s eyes) have inspired others to write music and verse that tells THE Story — the story of a savior, a gift like no other, the one by which God brings God’s own love and mercy, forgiveness and salvation wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.

Let us pray: Mighty and merciful God, You alone are love and grace, truth and light. As we prepare for the coming of Your only Son, as we hear the words of His heralds and look for His return, let our hearts be made glad, our hope steadfast, our love magnified by all that You've done in, through and as Jesus the Christ, our Lord and Savior, He who comes in Your holy Name. Amen