

When I was little, one of my favorite things was to get a big stack of books, walk into my older sister's room, and set the books down by her bed. I'd crawl into her bed with our dad in between us, and wait excitedly for my dad to read through the stack of 10-15 books we had compiled for the night .

Books on heavy rotation included *Green Eggs and Ham* and *Go Dog Go* among other Dr. Seuss favorites. "Oodles of Zeus" my dad would call those read-a-thon nights.

More often than not, most if not all the books in the pile were books that we had read countless times and almost knew by heart, and more often than not, my dad would only get through one or two before we were asleep for the night.

Each night, despite our track record, we would assemble this big stack, and each night my dad would start to work his way through the pile as if this would be the night we would get through them all.

Aside from the cast of the start of this week's Gospel sounding something like the cast of a Dr. Seuss book...

Emperor Tiberius ,
Philip who rules Itureaea and Trachonitis,
and Lysanias ruler of Abilene....

Aside from that, there's something about this week's gospel that is something like hearing a familiar story.

As a kid, one reason I loved reading that stack of books was because I knew them. They were familiar and timeless; hearing my dad read *Green Eggs and Ham* will always be a favorite. And yet, at the same time, each time I heard them read aloud to me, something was different. Something new would stick out or I would hear something in a new way, as if I was hearing it for the first time.

Reading these stories with my dad also reflected the need of the moment. Sometimes, the stories were to calm us down after a busy day. Sometimes, they were to distract us from a storm outside. Sometimes, they were to remind us of home when we were on vacation or away from our house visiting family. The story remained the same, but the timing was different—we were different.

I wonder if that isn't why we have this Dr. Seuss-like intro to today's gospel. For Luke, the timing of John's proclamation matters. Luke starts by naming the political climate—who was in charge? Who was controlling the region? Naming emperors, governors, brothers of so-in-so, priests... Luke proclaims that in the midst of this particular moment in history, the word of God *came* to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

In the midst of power-hungry leaders, in the midst of division, in the midst of fear, the word of God comes to John. In the wilderness.

The wilderness, a place of scarcity, of vulnerability, yet a place where God calls and provides strength and guidance.

And from here, John is on the move, proclaiming a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Preparing for Christ's ministry. God's word spurs John to testify to the one who will come after him.

To make sure folks know that John's proclamation wasn't just a strange, rogue message (although, we know John the Baptist was known to be a little peculiar), Luke sets John's ministry in the context of the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah, like *The Cat in the Hat* to 4-year-old Sarah, was familiar to Luke's audience. It helped ground the unknown of the wilderness. Isaiah serves to remind us that again and again, God's word continues to break in throughout history.

Continually, in all times and in all places, God's word comes to us. That's what we will celebrate at Christmas. And yet, this day we cannot forget our whimsical Dr. Seuss cast from Luke. While God's word transcends time, God's word is also responsive to and set within a particular time.

Just a few weeks ago, Pastor Stephan Bowman was here, and he shared his work with new ministries of the church. He told stories of the church advocating for school funding, affordable housing, community resources. This is what it means that the word of God comes in a particular time and place. It means that the needs of the here and now matter to God. And as the church, baptized into the same baptism of John the Baptist and Jesus, the needs of this particular time and this particular place matter to us, too. God's word has come to us, the collective church together.

We're guided by the words of the prophet Isaiah, the words of Luke, and the same words that are with us now. God's love, as we will hear again and again over this next year in Luke, God's love is a love that brings down the mighty and raises up the ones who suffer. God's love meets people in their beautiful particularities and responds uniquely.

And so here, gathered together this day—some of us even in our pajamas—it seemed like a good time to tell you a story.

In the second year of the presidency of Donald Trump, when JB Pritzker had just been elected governor of Illinois, and Rhamn Emmanuel was mayor of Chicago, when Elizabeth Eaton was presiding bishop of the ELCA and Wayne Miller, bishop of the Metro Chicago Synod,

The word of God came to Lauren and Aaron, Allison and Victoria, Chance and Paul, Lisa and Hannah, Matthew, Laura, and Allison.

and to the people of Wicker Park in the wilderness.

And they went into the surrounding neighborhoods proclaiming God's love for humanity, made known in Jesus.

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."

We are longing to see the salvation of God. That's what we long for, yearn for, and wait for this Advent, together. We long to see God's creation, God's beloved people reconciled. As we wait in anticipation of Christ's coming, what will we proclaim? Together with John, we testify to the one who is coming. Together, we testify to God's love that breaks in this day.