

# PILGRIM C H U R C H

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## WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO ABOUT THIS MESSIAH

Luke 3: 7 – 18

Pilgrim Bud Precise

She was all excited about reading her new Bible. The question comes, “Where do I begin?” And that is a more difficult question than most of us realize. It is very easy to be put off by all the begats in Matthew. And it doesn’t take me 15 pages to sort out all the rules of the Tabernacle in the book of Exodus. The Ten Commandments turned into the 713 laws in Leviticus tend to wear on you a bit.

You can’t just pick up Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales and read it without some sort of help. I think the same is true of the Bible. Reading the Bible makes more sense when you know the context of the passage.

We know the story of Jesus’ birth recorded in Luke – probably could quote most of it from memory. That story is more meaningful when we put it in context.

Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus was successor of the greatest emperor of the Roman Empire – Augustus Caesar. Tiberius began his reign on September 14, 14 B.C. E. It is fourteen years later that we have our story of the birth of Jesus in Luke. Whenever the Gospels refer to Caesar, they are talking about Tiberius Caesar. Solomon reigned as King over Israel from 961 to 922 B.C. Israel was unified under King Saul and King David. Then came King Solomon. At the end of Solomon’s reign, there was political warfare about who would be King. The Kingdom on Israel was divided – North was Galilee and South was Judea. Tiberius Caesar appointed Pontius Pilate as his governor in Judea. Herod was assigned to Galilee, the Northern Kingdom. Pilate watched Herod who watched his on people on behalf of the Roman Occupation forces. Scripture paints Pilate as a very bad guy, and he was. Truth is, Pilate was probably a typical representative for those who worked for the Roman Government. Pilate did what he had to do to keep the Jews quiet, no trouble for Rome to be bothered about. This strategy was the one that Rome had used in occupying countries for 100 years. They would put local people in charge, but Rome always called the shots. It wasn’t only the governing officials who kept the Jews underfoot. Pilate and Herod had support from the High Priest, Annas and Caiaphas. They

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worked with Herod under Pilate to keep everything smooth as possible in the temple. There had been a day – not too far in the past – when the High Priest served for life. But now, at the writing of Luke’s Gospel, the Romans installed and removed high priest whenever they wanted to. They made sure none of the Jewish clergy challenged Rome.

As long as the Jews did not mix religion with politics, as long as no one got restless during the temple rituals, as long as everyone knew that Israel’s God knew that Tiberius Caesar was in power – then everything was fine with the Romans.

Names we remember. Tiberius. Pilate. Herod. Annas. Caiaphas. Important people behind our text. It would be like reading the newspaper this morning. It doesn’t take long to recognize the people with the power. That is the context of our Luke story of the birth of Jesus.

“The word of God came to John, son of Zachariah, in the wilderness.” Literally it says, “The word of the Lord happened to John, son of Zachariah.” This long awaited word of God happened to John. Historians tell us about Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, but who in the world is Zachariah? Maybe we don’t know about Zachariah because his son, John, was not preaching in Jerusalem amid all the grandeur of the Temple. John is preaching out in the wilderness. He is in the rural area. And listening to his sermon, we find John calling his congregation “a brood of snakes” and “dumb as rocks.” Well, he is preaching in the backcountry. In Jerusalem, we have got the well trained, well connected Annas and Caiaphas working at the temple. They too are looking for the Word of God. But the Word comes to this unknown, untrained preacher out in the wilderness. This begins the story in Luke of the Good News of God.

Out there in the wilderness, John quotes the prophet, Isaiah and his beautiful poetry about making straight the highway of the Lord, lifting up valleys, and leveling mountains. The whole world is going to change. John’s message is direct – “Messiah is coming.” Think of our context for today. “Messiah” is a political designation for a political leader who will come to confront the Romans. This is not the message the installed puppet leaders want to hear. These words mean trouble for Herod and Pilate and their answering to Rome.

It was people like many of us to whom John preached this word, “Messiah is coming.” And the people listened and responded. The crowds asked “What then should we do?” There is no meditation group formed. There is no seminar on theology set up. John answered their question with specific ethical instructions. He told them specific things they could do with their ordinary lives that would make them a part of this new order. “If you have 2 coats, share with anyone who has none. Do the same with your food. To the tax collectors who responded John told them, “collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” And to the soldiers, John

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said, “do not extort money from anyone by threats and false accusation, and be satisfied with your wage.”

When I was growing up in the church, some of the time I got the impression that following Jesus was a very extraordinary, heroic sort of thing – like being Mother Teresa or a missionary. Being Christian was to do something really difficult. And we come to church, to worship, to rise above the mundane of this earthly life – we want to be “spiritual.”

Well, what are we gonna do about this Messiah? How will we respond to the message of the preacher from the wilderness. In our text for today, Luke is telling us that how we respond is by looking at how we spend our money. We respond by what we do with our possessions. We respond by being willing to change direction of our lives. Luke is telling us that we already have all that we need to follow the messiah. It is not that hard.

Is that why John’s sermon, though harsh-sounding is called “Good News” by Luke?

To all of you who live in some out-of-the way place,

To all of you who live ordinary lives,

To all of you who engage in ordinary, everyday affairs,

To all of you in the midst of injustice,

To all of you weighed down with cares and concerns,

There is “Good News.” The messiah is coming to you.

What are we gonna do about this Messiah?

We are called to follow, as we are, and where we are, and in that process of following, to become who we can be. That is the Good News of God.