

Tiberius, the Emperor of Rome.
Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea.
Herod, the ruler of Galilee.
Philip, ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis.
Lysanias, ruler of Abilene.
Annas and Caiaphas, high priests of Jerusalem.

If we're honest, it's hard to care about who was in charge of what in the first century, especially when those names read like extraneous details—a kind of prelude to the rest of the story. To our brothers and sisters of the first century, our indifference would have been nothing short of unfathomable. To them, those men *are* the story.

As emperor, Tiberius is the one whom everyone worships, a sort of demigod of peace and prosperity.

Pontius Pilate's clout and authority stems from his world as the emperor's envoy in Judea. Herod, Philip, and Lysanias are Pilate's local emissaries, and therefore they are also held in high esteem. Lastly, Annas and Caiaphas are the ones to whom Jews in the region followed and trusted for matters spiritual and practical. Together, these 7 men are the ones everyone expects to be inked into the annals of history and carved into the porticos of temples and marketplaces.

That John the Baptist is the one we remember most today would have been nothing short of offensive to them. John doesn't have the blue-blood lineage or socially esteemed position of the others. What he has is a reputation for endless bad hair days and dinners of dried, crusty bugs. On top of that, much of his adulthood has been spent in the barren and lifeless wilderness—

a place of low expectations,
A place most people avoid,
a place where God often seems silent.

...Until God is not—like today.

After countless weeks of nothingness, God's promises spring to life in John's soul. The urge to tell others about it is insatiable, and he can no longer keep silent. So, he leaves the cocoon of his isolation and sets the stage for the coming of the Messiah—the arrival of God in human flesh. That John doesn't look or act the part of a royal spokesperson is all

the more reason for John to carry out God's work. Through John, the world gets a first-hand look into God's heart, God's ways, and the new norm of God's beloved city. As John's life makes clear, no thing, no situation, and no one is useless or meaningless to God.

God sees.

God knows.

God cares.

God transforms.

God has the last word.

And this word is Love.

This is the Good News of Advent and Christmas: God is accomplishing God's purpose with the very people we write off, overlook, or question. Indeed, it wasn't a young, fertile woman who birthed John. It was Elizabeth—an octogenarian who endured the pain and isolation of infertility for decades. And it was an unmarried set of refugees who were endowed with the Savior of the world—not a respectful, dutiful, by-the-book couple. Don't be mistaken: our pilgrimage to Bethlehem isn't a trip to a baby in a manger; nor is it a memorial to the past. We are on a journey into the truth about ourselves and this world as it is supposed to be and will be in the end. God's dream isn't rooted not in our home, our kids, our job, our achievements, our connections, or our skills. It's rooted in unconditional and abundant love that restores what is broken and worn down and forgotten. Life, you see, happens in the margins and in the wilderness. What would it mean to befriend the wilderness of our lives?

Not long after the 2016 political election, a young man named Joseph Weidknecht wearing a shirt that said, "Proud to be a Deplorable" attended an anti-Trump protest in Austin, Texas. At that same protest was a young Muslim named Amina Amdeen wearing a hijab. Amina had come to the march expecting it to be like the peaceful rally she had attended the night before. Joseph came to disrupt and mock people like her—people fearing their safety and well-being as a result of new leadership. Not long into the rally, someone ripped Joseph's hat off of his head. Another tried to light his shirt on fire. When Amina saw it, her entire body began to boil. She rushed over to him, screaming into the crowd: "Leave him alone!"

Joseph was the last person Amina thought she would ever defend. Amina is the last person Joseph thought could or would protect him. When they met this past October for the first time after the incident, Amina explained that people had often tried to remove her own head covering far too many times than she could count. For her doing nothing wasn't an

option, even if that meant helping someone who despised her. Over the course of Joseph and Amina's conversation, Joseph admitted that his perception of Muslims was based on what he heard on the news, and not because of any truth or experience with someone who was Muslim. His eyes and hearts were opened because of Amina's grace. In turn, Amina learned about the experiences shaping Joseph's extreme beliefs, transforming a statistic and a label into a story.¹

Culturally and politically speaking, Amina and Joseph couldn't be further apart. Now, they sit face-to-face at the same table. Together, they are marching into the light of peace, finding grace in the most unlikely of places, being grace in the most unexpected ways, and setting the stage for how we should all be.

Friends, whom or what do you need to give a second glimpse? Whom or what have you written off?

It may be that the person you need to give another glimpse to is the one staring back at you in the mirror each morning. Maybe *you've* decided that something in your past or something you are facing now has rendered you of little consequence, meaning, or future. But as David Lose so pointedly remind us, the 7 so-called important men of consequence at the beginning of today's Gospel are now nothing more than mere "footnotes to Christ's story."² Don't ignore what's happening in the margins.

For in the fifteenth year of the reign of the emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod ruled Galilee, God bypassed the chiefs and the high priests and called a preacher's kid named John. God gave him a mission to call the people to turn their hearts from the selfishness of their lives and make space for the coming of the Christ. The world has not been the same since.

¹ Interview with Amina Amdeen and Joseph Weidknecht, *Morning Edition*, NPR, September 28, 2018, <https://storycorps.org/listen/amina-amdeen-and-joseph-weidknecht-180928/>, accessed December 8, 2018.

² David Lose "A Promise That's Easy to Overlook," *Dear Working Preacher*, December 2, 2012, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1500>.

And in the 2nd year of the presidency of Donald Trump, when Larry Hogan was governor of Maryland, and Reuben Collins, Gilbert Bowling, Thomasina Coates, Amanda Stewart, and Bobby Rucci were commissioners of Charles County, and Michael Curry was the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, and Mariann Budde was the Bishop of the Diocese of Washington, the word of God came to the people at 4535 Piney Church Road and in their homes, their workplaces, their trips to the mall. Indeed, the Word of God came in the most unexpected way to the most unsuspecting people— and it was shared in the most unexpected way.

So, I hope you're paying attention.

Someone needs to finish the story.

Why shouldn't it be you?

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