

-When I was in my internship congregation at St. Mark's Lutheran in San Francisco, I remember one day I forgot to bring my lunch. There was a sandwich shop a couple blocks away from the church that I went to occasionally, so I took my lunch break and went to go get my sandwich. After stepping out of the shop on my way back, I was in the process of crossing the street when 6 police motorcycles came up with sirens and blocked the intersection. Then I saw several police cars and a parade of black suvs coming up the street. People started gathering on the sidewalk and the parade of vehicles roared by. In the midst of it were two black limousines with American flags flying from the hood. This was President Obama's presidential motorcade. I finally remembered the news that he was in San Francisco for several events. "Look, there he is!", someone yelled as we saw his familiar head in one of the windows for about .5 seconds. The motorcade roared by, the police motorcycles moved on and the street returned to normal just as it had been about 4 minutes ago. "Wow, that was awesome!", a young boy next to me exclaimed. It was a site to see. If any of you have witnessed a motorcade pass by, you cannot help but feel a sense of power and importance. "There must be something really vital that they are going to," it seems. Why else would they be driving so fast?

-There is this, I think, "motorcade aurora" around our public officials that is quite powerful when you find yourself close to them. I was talking recently with Pastor Stacey Siebrasse, a friend of our congregation, who is beginning a new job as community organizer for the Missoula Interfaith Collaborative. MIC does a lot of work with the Montana State Legislature when it is in session and Stacey was mentioning how she's going to have to get over her "nervousness about talking with legislators". There is this divide that happens with a lot of us, she said to me, that we need to get over which makes us think "what importance does little ol' me bring in comparison to this very important lawmaker who decides policy?"

-This divide between rulers and "regular folks" was even more stark in ancient Rome. So much so that the Emperor was even seen as a God and worshiped. They were the ones that the historians talked and wrote about.

-Infact Luke, our gospel writer, seemed very familiar with ancient writings and documents of the Roman Empire. His writing style, more than any of the other Gospels, emulates these writings.

-One example of this is his introduction at the beginning of our gospel text today: "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." Wow, this is official. The "presidential motorcade" is passing by! Watch out!

-Doesn't this introduction remind you of another place where Luke does this type of writing? He does it again actually in the chapter earlier which is probably more well known because it happens to be our Christmas Eve scripture reading every single year: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria." Sound familiar?

-Like I mentioned in the children's sermon, this way of starting an official document of the Empire was very typical because it marked a very specific place in time. It made it, ironically, more official because these powerful characters were official! Everyone knew who they were and documenting their power "reigns" showed their influence.

-But, this gospel isn't an official Roman document. So, why does Luke choose to start out his story this way? I think it has to do with a bigger reason than just "pinpointing time" or wanting to sound more "official". It has to do with what God is up to.

-Notice in this introduction it goes from the "top down." First is Emperor Tiberius. But this story is not about Emperor Tiberius. Next is Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, and Herod, the ruler of Galilee. But this story is not about Pontius Pilate or Herod. Then we go down another level: Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis. Lysanias ruler of Abilene. This story isn't about either of them either. OK, how about the priests?? Annas and Caiaphas? Nope, even them.

-Instead we get this: "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." Wait, who? Who the *bleep is John? Oh yeah, this is the guy who wears camel skin and eats bugs.

-OK, Luke, so you mean to say God wasn't working in the all-important Emperor Tiberius, or Governor Pontius Pilate, or King Herod, or even any of the local "big-wig" rulers? You mean to tell me that God chose this crazy, camel pelt wearing, bug eating guy out in the dessert?? He's a nobody!! This is when readers of the gospel of Luke can insert the famous three-letter texting response: WTF? (W=What, T=The, F=I'll let you fill in the blank).

-This is the beginning of Luke's powerful assertion in God choosing the "nobodys" versus the "somebodys". The list of characters in this "official" document is ridiculous, borderline comical: a camel pelt wearing, bug eating preacher; a washed-out, too-old to be pregnant woman; a peasant, unmarried, farm-girl; a quiet, unassuming, carpenter who needs to go get registered for the census; and finally, a carpenter-turned-rabbi who was born in a cattle drinking trough amid manure.

-It is through Luke's telling of this powerful story that we get God's radical choosing of the "least of these." What is God up to? Maybe it's time to turn our attention away from the showy presidential motorcade and instead turn it to the soup-kitchen.

-Dr. Karoline Lewis, associate professor at Luther Seminary writes: "The perceived importance in the names of these officials ends up being no match for the name Mary

will give her son (Luke 1:31). Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas are powers in name only, names that fade away at the name Mary will name her first-born son. In contrast to these names that seek legacy and fame is the intimacy by which Mary learns of the name of her son. The names of the world pursue renown and recognition. Mary knows the name of her son because God regards those the world would overlook.”

-So that is what it comes down to in the end. If God bypasses these “big-wig important guys” and instead chooses these “nobodies” in the middle of “the sticks” within rural Palestine, than do you think it’s maybe possible that God choose me too?

-We are a culture that is very comfortable putting trust and responsibility in the “motorcade” and those who are “big and important”. But, the Gospel of Luke, at the very beginning of his rendition of the Jesus story, says: stop making that excuse. That’s not how God is working. God works through the “nobodys” (maybe like how you and I think of ourselves) to actually make a difference. This is unusual. This is uncomfortable. This is radical. This gets, towards the end of the story, gets the Savior of the world killed.

-"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."

-And ALL flesh shall see the salvation of God. Maybe even little ol' nobody me.

-God chooses the “nobodys.” May we, followers of Christ who are gathered here today, feel empowered by that radical call to help God work in and through the unexpected, mysterious, and “nobody”. Amen.