

So, I think it's an understatement for me to say that I have been disappointed in people as of late.

Whether it's newly-elected or appointed officials, or people spraying water cannons on protestors at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation on Thanksgiving Day,

or the legislators in Ohio who are seeking to pass a law which severely limits women's reproductive rights,

or the white nationalists and Nazi-sympathizers who seem to be cropping up around the country,

I am feeling very disappointed by the behaviors of others.

This has affected my mood, my attitude, and my enjoyment of life.

All of these collective situations have made me sad, angry, frustrated, and confused.

And I am not alone in this, I have talked to many folks who feel like they are experiencing a more somber Advent than usual.

All these situations are enough to make you lose faith in humanity, but that's the problem, we shouldn't put our faith in humanity.

I know that we describe ourselves as being God's hands and feet in the world, that we are the beacons of God's love, but that's just it, we are only the messengers.

We are the conduits by which God's love gets shared with the world, and sometimes we are better at it than other times.

But the point is that we are not the endgame, thanks be to God.

We are merely the middleman (or woman) between Jesus' will for the world, and the world actually looking like the one that Jesus envisioned.

Humans are a band of misfits who often get it right, but often don't.

We take two steps forward and one step back.

There are many stories of love and care and compassion circulating around the internet especially at this time of year, but there's also the news story of the person who stole all of someone's Christmas gifts.

At Bible Study on Thursday night, we discussed whether, over the long run, humans are generally improving as a species, or whether we're still as savage as we were thousands of years ago.

I think arguments can be made on both sides.

Even if we are improving, gradually, over the course of many generations, humans still disappoint us and let us down all the time.

Our families do it, our coworkers do it, our fellow church members do it, I am sure that I, as your pastor, have let you down before.

We can be really disappointing sometimes, so my point is that we can't place our ultimate trust in humans, and I think the writer of the Gospel of Luke agrees with me.

You see, today's scripture is short, it's only 6 verses long but 2 of those verses, or 1/3 of the passage, articulates all the "important" people of his time.

He mentioned Emperor Tiberius and Pontius Pilate and Herod and his brother Philip and Lysanias and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas.

This was a list of "who's who" in ancient Palestine.

These are the people that the Roman Empire told the common folk that they should believe in and trust.

These are the people who supposedly had their best interests at heart.

Hm. Sounds familiar.

But the Gospel writer had a different message for us.

You see, Luke was probably a historian, and it was traditional for historians to locate the timing of their writing according to who was in charge at the time, and that was the strategy that Luke used.

Like any traditional historian, he's locating the story of John the Baptist in history, and he acknowledges that the world has put these certain people on a pedestal.

He says, these are the people of this world that our power structure has created, but I am going to deviate from the norm, and introduce you to someone whom we wouldn't normally find in the history books.

This person will help us be attentive to the things of God's realm.

It's not the emperor, the governor, the rulers or any of the high priests, it's a man living out in the desert.

He's an unusual sort, he lives on a starvation diet, he wears clothes that even your lowest-cost thrift store wouldn't take and whenever he preaches, it's fire and brimstone.

And yet, the word of God came to him, John son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

Luke is quite the audacious historian by including John, but his point is that we need to listen to John because he is pointing us to something beyond ourselves, beyond this world, beyond the important people ruling our lands.

This man is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and he says that something important is going to happen.

We need to be ready because God is coming, and we need to be aware of what's in our lives that might prevent us from having a relationship with God.

If there are obstacles in our lives, which are distracting us from placing our complete trust in God, let's get an earthmover and do some reorganizing.

If you have a mountain or hill, an impediment, which is distracting you from your focus on God, level it.

If your path is crooked and you keep investing your mental and emotional energy into other things, straighten out the pathway.

Nothing should stand in the way between you, your life, your priorities, and your devotion or reliance on the one who created us.

This Advent season, I discovered that my trust was misplaced.

I was relying on Washington and Wall Street for hope.

But they will always let you down.

They can launch their policy initiatives, levy their taxes, try to keep us from going over a fiscal cliff.

Our leaders can secure themselves in the history books written by traditional historians, humans can hold them up in high regard as being important, just like the Romans held up their people.

But this season, I have been reminded not to place my trust in them.

Not to place my ultimate confidence in them.

I was foolish enough to wonder why I kept getting so upset every time I read the news, well, it's because I was subconsciously looking to them to answer my prayers.

But John calls us away from New York City and Washington D.C., he calls us to the wilderness.

He calls us to kneel next to the crib of a tiny, vulnerable, baby, and remember that THIS, this is who we need to place our trust in.

This baby that will grow up to challenge all the power structures, if we follow him, if we do what he commands us to do, if we make him the sun, the center of our lives around which all else revolves, we will be okay.

Hopefully we wont get depressed over and over again.

If we remember that he never lets us down, that he's not a bigot or a white supremacist, that he isn't a misogynist, and he isn't wealthy and doesn't have conflicts of interest, then we will remember why he is the one we are called to follow.

Because he called us beyond the power structures of this world, he has called us to love one another without hesitation or reservation or qualifications.

He called us to care for this planet, to share resources and to make sure that everyone has what they need to survive, and if we have more than we need, like two coats, to give some of our things away, until everyone has at least one.

He called us to cross the tracks, to sit with the person nobody else wants to associate with.

He says turn away from Herod and Pontius Pilate, because they don't care about you one bit and they aren't here to create God's realm on earth.

Turn towards the woman at the well, the Leper, the prostitute, the Samaritan.

Go to the inner city, the dangerous parts, the places that we've cordoned off in our minds as being places we don't go.

Go there.

That's where you'll encounter God, through the people who desperately need you and likewise, they will point you to God.

The buck doesn't stop with us, we are merely the people on the airport runways with the light sticks, directing people towards God.

We must not place our ultimate trust in each other, otherwise we will be let down, as I have felt recently.

But we must surround ourselves with others who point us in the right direction.

Because if you are headed the right way, guess what, you can point others in the right way too.

You see, it's a domino effect.

But if you are misguided and you are looking to or Washington, well guess what, you aren't going to be a pretty dim beacon of God's love.

You will have so many hills, valleys and crooked paths in the way between you and God, you'll be neglecting your responsibility to be that conduit of love, light, acceptance, compassion and forgiveness.

If you allow yourself to have a hardened heart, you're going to point people in the wrong direction through your words and actions.

So, my dear friends, Psalm 146 says, "Don't place your trust in princes, in mortals" (verse 3), for they will always let you down.

It's part of being human, we mess up, we fail each other.

But place your trust in that baby in a manger, follow him, fix your focus on him and you will find that those other things, the Herods of our day, will no longer have power over you or your emotions.

You won't become angry or despondent over the choices our leaders make because you know their time is temporary.

That doesn't mean you should check out though and not pay attention.

We are still needed to be vigilant, to hold them accountable, but if you fix your sight on Jesus, I pray that you will have the optimism and the resolve to continue to turn the world upside down, lift up the lowly and bring the powerful down from their thrones.

And in doing so, you'll be that messenger pointing others to the ultimate truth, which is that they are loved, they matter,

and while it may not look like it, the realm of God, which we all need to help co-create here on earth, is conspiring in favor of the lowly ones. Amen.