

I had the opportunity to visit Rome back in 2007.

I walked along some roads which had been there for more than 2,500 years.

The roads built in the ancient Roman Empire were engineering marvels.

At its peak, no fewer than 29 wide military highways radiated from the capital city.

The whole empire comprised of more than 250,000 miles of roads, 50,000 of which were stone-paved.

Fifty thousand miles of stone-paved roads.

Mind you, this was before modern machinery and earth movers and cement pourers.

These roads were sophisticated, they had drainage ditches on both sides, and they were constructed by hand, mostly by Roman soldiers.

They were built to last.

But there was a hierarchy to the roads.

The best-paved roads, with the beautiful landscaping, those are the roads that lead to Rome.

Other well-maintained roads lead to water sources because they were so highly trafficked.

Paved roads also led to other important cities and towns.

If your town was unimportant or small or remote or inhabited by poor people, you didn't get a paved road, you got a dirt path.

Many private individuals constructed their own roads, so if your community didn't have people of means, then you couldn't afford to build your own roads and the state certainly had no incentive to invest in you.

In today's scripture lesson, the writer of the Gospel of Luke tells us the people who were accessible by paved roads: Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas.

These people were in Rome, Judea and Galilee, they had paved roads maintained by the state.

But today's story also tells us that that's not where the word of God was.

You couldn't access the word of God by travelling in your ornate horse-drawn cart down a smooth road.

No, the word of God was not only off the main road, not only off the dirt road, not only off the beaten path, the word of God was in the wilderness.

No roads went there.

There was no road access to the wilderness because folks had no reason to go there.

You had to park your car, walk many miles down a dirt path, then bush-whack your way for a few more miles, clearing brush as you went, and *there* you'd be able to hear the word of God, coming from the mouth of a calloused and filthy footed, wild ox of a man.

He's got wild honey dripping off his scraggly beard and is arrayed in something that could best be described as resembling the fur of some road-kill animal from the side of one of those big roads.

He's got a distant look in his eye, as though at any moment he might lunge forward and begin to spout off whatever things come into his head.

His name is John the Baptizer.

If he were alive today, he still wouldn't be accessible by road.

Because even today, our best roads are clustered around cities, around centers of power.

Think of Wall St. and Fifth Avenue in New York, Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington D.C., Beacon Street here in Boston.

The fanciest, most well-known roads are associated with power.

But God reminds us, that's not where we're going to hear the word of the Lord.

The word of the Lord is in the cancer ward, in the AIDS clinic, in the inner-city slum, on the battlefields of Syria, in Yemen, on death row and in the prisons and detention centers of this land.

The Word of the Lord is on Harrison Avenue in Boston which is home to Rosie's Place and the Pine Street Inn.

The word of the Lord is on Methadone Mile, which is a part of Mass Ave., in Boston.

The Word of the Lord might be right on your street, coming from the home of your lonely neighbor.

The Word of the Lord came to the backwater town of Bethlehem, which was probably only accessible by dirt paths.

Beautiful, paved Roman roads did not lead there.

It's no accident that the writer of the Gospel of Luke starts this section about John the Baptist by listing a who's who among the leaders in the Roman Empire.

He's showing us that he knows who his readers are paying attention to.

He knows they're listening to the political *and* religious leaders, as he did have some high priests in his list.

Luke was a historian, and he knew the people who would go down in history as the 'important' ones.

Then he goes on to say, but they're not the ones you're supposed to be listening to.

They're not the only ones who need to be remembered throughout history.

And the historian wrote his own account of the people whom he thought should be remembered, one of them was a wild man in the wilderness.

Luke believed that he's the one that everyone from his contemporaries to us, two thousand years later, should be listening to.

This John was proclaiming that the prophet Isaiah's prophecies were coming true.

Luke knows that John doesn't have a stage or a microphone or a million cameras broadcasting to television stations across the world.

He doesn't have a Parthenon or a Coliseum, but he is the one you should be listening to.

God gives a "preferential option for the poor," meaning, they're the ones that have the Good News.

As Jesus tells us that whatever we have done for the least of these, we have done for him.

"God is at work in the weak and small, those in the wilderness, off the radar of the rich and powerful –

babies and barren women and unwed teenage mothers and wild-eyed prophets and itinerant preachers and executed criminals [that would be Jesus] – to change the world.

And, to be quite honest, God's not done yet.

God continues to work through unlikely characters today –

unpopular teens and out-of-work adults and opioid addicts and stay-at-home parents and underpaid secretaries and night-shift workers and police officers and volunteer baseball coaches–

to announce the news of God's redemption.” (Lose, David. “Advent 2C: Audacious Historians” www.DavidLose.net.)

I went to a clergy gathering last week, and during the devotional time, we were asked to share a time when we felt the presence of God.

One person mentioned that she saw the face of God in poor, elderly woman who visited their church's craft fair.

Someone else mentioned that she felt God when she was making Christmas cards with a young child that would be sent to children in our country who are housed in detention centers.

Another person mentioned that he felt the presence of God in the hospital room with two parents who were cradling their still-born child.

Nobody said that they felt God at the State House or in the presence of a celebrity.

We feel the presence of the Lord in the lowly, the downtrodden, the outcast, the ones the powerful world has forgotten.

We hear the word of the Lord in the places that we can't get to through fancy, well-manicured roads.

We have to go off the map, to the end of the road and down the dirt path, out of the way, out of our comfort zones, to feel God's presence.

In the list of people that Luke mentions, the two people who are responsible for John and Jesus' killings are included.

Herod Antipas ordered the beheading of John the Baptist and Pontius Pilate allowed for the crucifixion of Jesus.

Luke has the audacity to mention the people responsible for John the Baptist's and Jesus's deaths, just prior to telling us about the importance of John the Baptist and Jesus.

You could think that Herod and Pontius Pilate and all they represented, that they 'won,' because they 'succeeded' in killing John and Jesus.

But they didn't win, because who do we remember today?

Who do we follow today?

Whose words do we lift up as sacred today?

Who still has a deep and meaningful influence on our lives?

In whose name do we gather each week?

Who do we emulate each time we have a sacrament of Baptism?

Not Herod or Pilate. Jesus and John the Baptist.

They killed their mortal bodies but not their message.

Luke the historian wanted us to remember the powerless people, the people you can't get to by paved road.

And he succeeded.

The ones who challenged the political, economic and religious powers of the time.

They're the ones whom the word of the Lord came to, they're the ones we remember.

God still calls us today to hear the word of the Lord, but we have to go to the right places to hear it.

Where are you willing to travel so that you can feel the presence of God and have the word of the Lord revealed to you?

Amen.