

December 5, 2021 – The Second Sunday of Advent

There is a recipe here to prepare one Lord's coming.

Serves all people.

Try to find a recipe these days and few consult a cookbook anymore. The solution is the same one we apply to many problems. Google it.

Recipe pages on the Web are notorious for ... not giving us the recipe we came for without a bit of backstory.

It's become a cliché of sorts ...

“Let me tell you why I love these particular ingredients,” a viral tweet sarcastically mimics. “It was a crisp, fall evening and I, a wide-eyed college student studying in Rome ...”

Oh no.

Not what anyone wants to sift through when all they want to know is whether to mix in one egg or two.

Maybe Luke's list of ingredients reads a bit more like the filler than the essentials. The characters he name-checks are largely familiar: the reigning emperor; Pontius Pilate who will have a massive role to play later in the Gospel narrative; his brother Philip is best known for marrying Salome who will also personally enter the story in infamously notorious fashion. The high priests will of course come into conflict with the Lord Jesus.

The exception, for me anyway, is Lysanias of Abilene. I know I had to look him up. My only frame of reference for Abilene is a Texas town with some moderate-sized colleges that contributed to some obscure football trivia. It was also an adjoining kingdom to Judea, and it, too, had fallen under annexation by Rome.

But for the most part, I can gloss past those names. Sure, Luke, fine, but when can we start cracking some eggs and chopping some garlic?

The evangelist could adapt his skill set just fine, I think, if he needed to be a food blogger. He tells us these details because, just as many a chef or foodie, he has passion for his craft. Historian. Storyteller. But above all, one captivated by the person of Jesus Christ, God made flesh.

He sets up the worldly powers only to knock them down. He names names and then tells us the word of God came to a no-name. From the middle of nowhere.

It's easy to lose track of these details. I've got to check my notes to be able to reference Ituraea and Trachonitis. They blend together and then they mix with an obscure preacher's son out in the wild like oil and water.

But this John fellow, the word of God he brings and the Living Word to whom he gives way, especially, this activity is going to impact the world more than those others that the Gospel names.

This, the historian tells us by contrast, is the main ingredient. The unlikely item that will really give everything its true flavor. Grown in this wild setting.

Luke 1, verse 80 just kind of tosses in, seeming almost an afterthought, that John grew up strong in spirit out in the wilderness until his time came to go public with his ministry.

The wilderness is captured in the imagination in the story of God with God's people as a place of empty nothingness and harbor for unseen threats but also a refuge and a venue for God's provision, as it was when the Israelites came out of Egypt.

Perhaps it takes someone intimately familiar with such territory to guide those who are yet to come through it. It takes a mysterious God, anyway, to put any recipe for hope into the hands of a man whose diet consists mainly of locusts and wild honey.

To borrow from another comparison wisecrackers have observed in our modern culture, John is raised right for the heat of the kitchen. He is not a product of British-style baking shows where a contestant tells us about the wee tart you've made with a crust that's just lovely.

John's ready for the American cable reality version where the competitors' knives have been removed from the drawers and replaced with Philips head screwdrivers and the producers have released raccoons in through the back door, the clock's been set for 30 seconds and you need to bake peace on earth and goodwill toward men to satisfy the judges.

John is a prophet who points to the one who can see something more than a desert with a humble river running through it, inhospitable but to the heartiest of souls. Who can make real the leveling of valley lifted and the mountains made low. John's witness welcomes us to come and see. To

look at next to nothing and see something great. Potential for radical transformation. Far and wide in the desert, John may not have come across a whole lot of change in topography but he saw a whole lot of folks and a whole lot of change of heart. He got to experience a taste of what Jesus came to stir up.

John displayed faith not in his own ability but in the way that God formed him for his role. To be this kind of a prep cook for the master chef who came in after him. Those whom he baptized out in the desert I'm sure often came to him in no shape to be imaginable as the final product Jesus would make them. The Greek sense of repentance, metanoia, indicated a complete turning away from sin and changing course to go in the opposite direction. Sincere and dedicated change. The baptism John offered began a work in so many that would have appeared at surface level, impossible.

But the Lord comes not to scratch the surface but to dig in deep, unfazed by the mess he's entering into and more than capable of making something beautiful from a whole lot of mess. All we have to do is clear the path ... get ourselves, so foolishly proud, so unwilling to release control, really just the illusion of control, out of the way and let God be God.

It's prep work that should be easier than we make it on ourselves but it often takes more than just the four weeks of a season. It can easily take a lifetime. But if we can trust our lives to God, the end result will absolutely be worth it.

Amen.