

ELCAvotes Bible Study: From the margins

"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin—we must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

THE WORD OF GOD ALWAYS SPRINGS FROM THE MARGINS By Lenny Duncan

Why is the #ELCAvotes initiative so important? Is it the political magnitude of this upcoming election? Is it the fact that the historic piece of civil rights history known as the Voting Rights Act has been dismantled under the cloak of "everything is better now?" Perhaps it is the rhetoric and the heat of this year's campaign that has moved our church to a place where we are paying close attention to this fundamental piece of our democracy?

I submit we are moved by the Holy Spirit to speak out at this time. I submit that our foundation is one rooted in Scripture. That as Dr. King put it, it is time for a "radical revolution of values." This brief Bible study is not meant to be comprehensive. How can one comprehensively cover God's heart for the oppressed and the marginalized? To do that we would have to start in Genesis and go through to Revelation and then study church history from the very beginning.

No, this is simply meant to point to one instance where God passed up those in power and used those on the very edges of society to do the incredible. In fact, this is the very inauguration of salvation and the long road to the cross. As Lutherans we would do well to listen up, since we are so proud of being theologians of that very cross and love to be known as the "grace people."

A reading from the Holy Gospel According to Luke (Luke 3:1-6) NRSV

Before we jump into the rich imagery of the text, I want you to look at the first paragraph or so. It would be easy to believe that the author of Luke was just placing this part of the story in historical context, that he is just setting John's part of the narrative in a place that other ancient readers can place in the culture of the Roman Provenience of Palestine. In a small part, that is one of his goals. To capture meaning and history and convey holiness within the confines of one scroll is no small feat. Every part of the Gospel is packed with meaning and allusions to the world into which Jesus steps.

This first paragraph is no different. The word of God does not come to the ruler of the world, Tiberius Caesar, a self-proclaimed God. Nor did it come to his appointed ruler, Pontius Pilate of Judea. True power often passes worldly power right by.

The word of God did not come to Herod or his brother or for that matter his family. God did not choose to use the rulers of the people of Judea.

Nor did it come to Annas and Caiaphas, high priests of the temple and the holiest of all men in the land. God is historically tough on clergy and Jesus doubly so. As someone studying to be clergy at seminary, I never forget that. We are often on the wrong end of what God is doing in the world.

Annas and Caiaphas are depicted in this rather harsh light. The same I try to cast on myself. The same I pray all clergy who are using this study do.

No, the word of the Lord came to a man in the wilderness – a nobody, in the middle of nowhere, preaching a radical revolution of the values the people of Israel held dear. Baptism was a radical idea. No longer would people living in poverty have to make the long journey to the temple in Jerusalem and carry the financial burden of the temple system. This was enough to get someone killed in John's day.

The word of God has always leaned into the margins. It has sprung forth from the margins, not the powerful, the rulers of the world, or those comfy with privilege. When we take away the voice of those on the margins, we are silencing the Johns of our generation and the very important preparation work for Jesus to show up. It is in these communities in the wilderness that we will find the very word of God. #ELCAvotes wants to make sure those voices, and the word of God, have a voice in November.

--Lenny Duncan is a graduate of United Lutheran Seminary. He is currently serving as the mission developer pastor at Jehu's Table in Brooklyn, New York. Lenny spent more than a decade homeless recovering from alcoholism and has experienced the criminal justice system first hand. Having already spent a lifetime on the margins, he brings the unique perspective of the surprising amount of hope and grace one can find when listening to the cries of the oppressed.

Luke 3:1-6

3 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,

2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,

4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

5 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;

6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Discussion questions

1. How can I be a “voice of one calling in the wilderness?” In our community and context?
2. Do I truly believe the voices of the marginalized are just as important as mine, if not more?
3. Was Jesus political? Is ministry inherently political?
4. What crooked roads would I like to see God make straight?
5. What are three things we as a church are going to do to support the #ELCAvotes campaign?

Additional resources for discussion and study

Visit [ELCA.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/ELCAvotes](https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/ELCAvotes) to:

- › Join the ELCAvotes initiative;
- › Learn how to participate further in conversation and prayer around our role as people of faith in ensuring our election systems promote dignity and respect for all; and
- › Find out how you can speak out as an advocate by engaging in local efforts to guarantee the right to vote to all citizens.

Learn more about ministries of the ELCA that are leading this effort:

- › ELCA Racial Justice Ministries
[ELCA.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/Racial-Justice-Ministries](https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/Racial-Justice-Ministries)
- › ELCA Advocacy
[ELCA.org/advocacy](https://www.elca.org/advocacy)
[Facebook.com/ELCAadvocacy](https://www.facebook.com/ELCAadvocacy)
[Twitter.com/ELCAadvocacy](https://twitter.com/ELCAadvocacy)
- › ELCA Young Adult Ministry
[ELCA.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Young-Adult-Ministry](https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Young-Adult-Ministry)