

A friend of mine recently lost her five year old son to cancer. Part of her trauma was people who meant well, but who actually said hurtful things. While her son was dying, one of her friends said, "You're not praying hard enough. If you really ask God to save your son's life, your son will live, but you have to insist that God will do it." She said to me, "I can't pray that way. If I do, I not only lose my child, I lose my God." People mean well, but sometimes they can't fit together the pieces of life. In a jigsaw puzzle, you have all these pieces, and you come across one you're sure should go in, but it doesn't. So you take it, you turn it, and you actually force it, refusing to believe it's the wrong piece. In life, we know there's a big picture, and we know we've got these pieces, but it gets frustrating when they don't come together. Somebody may tell you these pieces just won't make a picture, but you know they do. You've seen the box. People who believe in God have seen the box. They know there's a solution to the puzzle. Even in the face of great tragedy, somehow, everything fits.

St. Luke introduces John the Baptist into his story like a puzzle piece that fits perfectly. But he does it with one of the most boring sentences in the Gospel. "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, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." Tiberius is a successor to Julius Caesar in Rome. Pilate enters the story again at the end. So does Herod. This Herod is the son of the Herod from the story of Jesus' birth--Herod, Jr. These leaders are ruling places like Rome, Galilee, Ituraea, Abilene, and Trachonitis--the DC, Ozarks, Plaza, and Raytown of their day. Before Luke introduces John, he names the political leaders. This boring sentence does a couple things. It opens this chapter like a drumroll, or like an announcer saying, "And in this corner, weighing 200 lbs. . . John the Baptist!" But it also says the religious story you're about to hear fits like a puzzle piece into the political story. The arrival of John the Baptist will affect all of Galilee, Ituraea, Rome, and Raytown. Luke could have scrapped this sentence and wrote instead, "In the year 28 AD," but he chose to name the secular leaders to set up his religious story.

Once in a while people may try to convince us that the pieces just won't fit--that there is no purpose to life, that religion should not affect politics, that Hannukah and Christmas should be neutralized, that prayer has no place in education, that science fights faith, or that suffering disproves a loving God. John the Baptist appears to announce that the pieces do fit. And the picture they form will be clear on Christmas Day.