

Sunday Lesson – December 5, 2021

GOSPEL: Luke 3: 1-6

“A Baptism of Life-Change”

Context

“Today’s Gospel begins not with the Baptist’s ringing call to repentance, but with a long and detailed list of rulers.

Luke’s litany of imperial, regional, and religious authorities does more than date John’s ministry to 28 or 29 CE. It also contrasts human kingdoms with God’s reign. The claims to authority that Tiberius or Herod or the high priest may make are not ultimate. God’s people owe allegiance first and foremost to God. And it is God’s word that sets John’s ministry in motion. John has been commissioned to prepare the way not for lord Caesar or any earthly lordling, but for the one true Lord.

Like Moses, like the prophetic voice in Isaiah 40, John challenges God’s people to see the wilderness as a place not of desolation, but of hope. God is calling them, like the Babylonian exiles, to leave their captors behind and head home through the wilderness. God is calling them, like the people of Israel in Egypt, to join an exodus out of slavery into God’s promised fresh start (see Luke 9:31, where Jesus discusses his Exodus with Moses and Elijah). John preaches that the first step on this journey toward freedom is a baptism of repentance.” *(Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-31-6-3)*

Insight

“John proclaims a baptism of repentance that leads to release from sins. Release (Greek *aphesis*) is the same word that Jesus uses twice in Luke 4:18 to describe his mission: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me ... to proclaim *release* to the captives and ... to let the oppressed go free...” The release or forgiveness that follows repentance does



not undo past sins, but it does unbind people from them. It opens the way for a life lived in God’s service. By proclaiming such release, John fulfills his father’s prophecy: “you, child, ... will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness (*aphesis*) of their sins” (Luke 1:77). This salvation looks like a new dawn for those trapped in darkness and death’s shadow. It is light that reveals a new path, the way toward peace (Luke 1:78–79).” *(Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-31-6-3)*

Gospel Reading

“In the fifteenth year of the rule of Caesar Tiberius—it was while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod, ruler of Galilee; his brother Philip, ruler of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias, ruler of Abilene; during the Chief-Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—John, Zachariah’s son, out in the desert at the time, received a message from God. He went all through the country around the Jordan River preaching a baptism of life-change leading to forgiveness of sins, as described in the words of Isaiah the prophet:

Thunder in the desert!

“Prepare God’s arrival!

Make the road smooth and straight!

Every ditch will be filled in,

Every bump smoothed out,

The detours straightened out,

All the ruts paved over.

Everyone will be there to see

The parade of God’s salvation.”

The Message

What It Could Mean?

“Luke’s Gospel proclaims: God does not remain distant from the world. God’s reign enters time and space on the stage of world

history, where life is too often constrained by people and events beyond one's control.

Luke 3:1-6 sets the stage for John the Baptist's prophetic call by introducing an A-list of Earthly Powers: an emperor, a governor, three tetrarchs, and two high priests. Together they represent rulers of the known world, the regional lands, and the religious, political, and economic complex that stands at the heart of Jerusalem. Collectively they hold all the authority and might that wealth, military prowess, or ancestry can command.

Indeed, the world to which God sends the Messiah is a world held captive to earthly forms of domination and influence, represented in Luke's Gospel by men like Tiberius, Pilate, Herod (Antipas), Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas. But, for Luke, the word of God does not come to any of those influential men of power, nor to the political territories over which they have command. It comes instead to a lone man out in the wilderness: John, son of Zechariah.

Given its place in the Exodus narrative, the wilderness (*eremos*=desert, deserted place) in biblical writings often represents vulnerability and uncertainty. In Luke it is a place of testing and hunger, sometimes danger or destruction or being lost and then found.

It is precisely in that wilderness place of vulnerability and danger that God appears. Just as God guided the Israelites by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21), God provides what is needed in the wilderness, such as daily manna (Deuteronomy 8:16; Psalm 78:24) or a feast for multitudes (Luke 9:12-17). Thus, the wilderness is where (and how) God's people learn to depend on God.

The purpose of John's prophetic calling is not only to prepare the way of the Lord (Luke 3:4), but to prepare the people to receive the Lord (Luke 1:16-17) through repentance for the forgiveness of sin (Luke 3:3; repentance = *metanoia*, to change one's mind). The Gospel reading for next week has much more

to say about John's message of repentance, while the current text, particularly the quotation from Isaiah 40 that concludes the passage, sharpens the focus on preparation.

Not only do raised-up valleys and flattened mountains lead to smooth passages, but they also represent radical transformation. The language of reversal, common in Luke, evokes words from Mary's song, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:52; see also Luke 4:18).

Today, having experienced the wilderness-level trauma of a global pandemic for nearly two years, many people long for certainty about the road ahead. Some hope for a new life, others ache to return to the way things were, and still others have little energy to look beyond struggles of the current day.

Very little is certain about the post-pandemic world, except for the promise represented by John's proclamation in the wilderness: God enters **this** time **and this** space in **this** period of history, so that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:6). Prepare the way of the Lord." (*Excerpts from workerpreacher.org; Revised Common Lectionary by Audrey West*)

Readings for Further Study

- [Hebrews 11:1](#) "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."
- [1 Peter 3:15](#) *The hope that is in you*
- [John 6:47](#) "He who believes on Me has everlasting life"

Thought for the Day

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." ~ *Philippians 4:7*

A Prayer

Prince of Peace, prepare the way for yourself in our lives and our world. Help us to see paths that you have prepared for us, and awaken in us a desire to create new paths to you, straight through the most challenging places. **Amen.**