

Year C, Advent 2  
December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
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Luke 3:1-6 and Philippians 1:9-11

### **Escaping the Bondage to Ourselves**

Here is the question; why does Luke go into so much detail when describing the setting for his story?

*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.*

An incredible sentence! Luke goes to great lengths to give us a precise geopolitical context for something that is happening in history. At a particular point, in a particular place, inhabited by particular people, something begins to happen. The word of God came to John son of Zechariah. For Luke this something is hugely important—so important that Luke believes Isaiah wrote about it centuries before:

*“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*

In the wilderness alone and unobserved by others, John, son of Zechariah, received a communication from God telling him to prepare people for the one who is coming. Luke uses the text from Isaiah to heighten the earth-shaking drama of it. Originally Isaiah’s poetry, taken at its most literal level, looked toward the return of the Jewish exiles from their Babylonian captivity. Isaiah said the returning exiles need not be afraid for their way home would be prepared before them. But the poetry exceeds the historic context and Luke seizes on it to point to the coming of a universal Messiah who will make a way for the whole world’s escape from bondage and their return home. So, I ask, when it says “All flesh shall see the salvation of God” is this an apocryphal vision soon to be fulfilled when the whole world simultaneously sees the salvation of God in the love and forgiveness of Christ, perhaps through our modern connective technology? Will the time come, perhaps soon, when the obstacles we throw in the path of our redemption will be pushed aside, covered over and straightened out so that the road of his return is smooth?

Rome was the one who built roads. Their engineers plotted a straight line toward their destination and then crews built the roads. If mountains were in the way they were lowered, if valleys were too deep, they were filled. Almost nothing stopped them.

Roman roads were built to bring the Legions who brutally imposed their “peace”. Is there any other way for peace to arrive other than by force? If so, what form would it take? How do we grasp on to it or is it an empty dream? It’s so tempting these days to just give up and dull ourselves with empty busyness and the anxieties of day-to-day life—no larger vision to stiffen our drooping heads. On this second week in Advent we look for something more hopeful than the brutal and despairing images we see on television.

John, son of Zechariah, who lived in the wilderness on the edge of civilization proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He sees humans as having a terrible problem that needs straightening out. Something within the human heart has gone terribly wrong and many lives are being lost. John the Baptist thinks his countrymen need to repent; change their minds and go a different direction. He asks the crowds coming to him to publicly confirm their intention to change by being baptized.

John the Baptist, looking from his place in the wilderness where he has no rivals, sees that people are destroying the very community they need by ignoring God and rivaling each other. If this unclean desire to ignore God and best their neighbor could be washed out, they would find peace.

John himself had tried to discipline his desires and now lived on the outer edge, dressed simply and surviving off the land. He knew that while you might envy a man dressed in purple robes and eating roast lamb, no one would envy a man wearing camel hair and eating grass hoppers flavored by hard-to-get wild honey. No, John the Baptist had chosen to live off the grid out of his resolve to live a non-rivalrous life before God. He thought others could do it too through repentance.

Convicted people everywhere pledged themselves to try harder by submitting to John’s baptism. It was a sincere movement and quite popular – but it didn’t work. Under John the Baptist people could change behavior for a while but his message of trying harder didn’t change hearts. Something more, something different, was needed. What could it be?

The apostle Paul, coming after John the Baptist and Jesus knew what it was. He preached it all the time. The story of the death and resurrection of Jesus contains all humans need to find their hearts changing. Jesus, God’s Son enters history as a vulnerable child; he grows into full adulthood, preaches love and forgiveness and shows it in his actions toward all people, even the ones the culture looked down on. When Jesus behaved with this kind of compassion, the self-centered and self-righteous people, and that included just about everybody, did not like

what Jesus showed them about themselves by contrast. So they condemned him as a common criminal and though innocent, they killed him. God allowed this so they, and everyone since, could see what we humans do to each other in our false communities based on exclusion.

What is the penalty for killing? By the law of tit-for-tat we deserve to die but the punishment never comes! Instead of the sword of revenge, the resurrected Jesus brings us the peace of his forgiveness. He tells us he has broken our cycle of violence by giving us the power to forgive in the way we have been forgiven. It's a Word as rooted in history, time, geography and scripture as the other "in-history" words Luke uses to ground his story.

The people of Philippi have heard this Word and their hearts have begun to change. Paul hopes their growth will continue and so he tells them, "This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight" Did you catch that? He prays the Philippian people's love will grow richer with knowledge and all kinds of insight. We can know how the story works and gain insight to the connections between things. Insight grasps how what we do impacts our families, friends, communities and the world and how they in turn impact us. There is so much more to see than we see. Knowledge and all kinds of insight lower mountains and fill valleys making Christ's coming easier to receive.

Paul's love prayer continues. "I pray ... you will be able to decide what really matters so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of Christ." "The day of Christ,' there's that Apocryphal pointer again. Paul wants the hearts of his people to be in the right place when our current time is up and the new beginning with Christ in his fullness, has arrived. It could be soon!

Finally Paul says when time is up, "I pray that you will then be filled with the harvest of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God." He prays the Philippian people will continue to move away from "me-me-me" it's all about me;" to actions that give glory and praise to God. He wants them to continue to escape their bondage to themselves and find life in serving God and all those God loves.

Paul knows the harvest of righteousness that comes from Jesus Christ is the capacity to give glory and praise to God. We give you glory, dear Lord, for what you have shown us about yourself and we praise you that you have found a way to get through, even to us. Amen.