

“The Mission of John, part 1” – January 20, 2019 – Luke 3:1-6

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When we come to the third chapter of Luke’s gospel, we are confronted with a long list of names of people and places. These lists are long and boring. They seem pointless. Who cares who the emperor is? What does it matter if so and so’s brother is the tetrarch of the neighboring region? What do they have to do with God and Jesus and the gospel? The list of names seems like useless information that has no bearing on God’s message to us today. We’re not overly interested in what was going on in the world at that time.

Luke tells us that the man in charge is a fellow named Tiberius. He is the Roman Emperor – the epitome of wealth and power. Pontius Pilate was the governor of the region – the one whose duty it was to keep order in the area. His name will pop up again in the future. Herod was the Jewish king. Only having the limited power that Rome extended to him in that tiny region of the empire. A few other political names are listed. And then Luke tells us the names of the religious leaders. The former and current high priests Annas and Caiaphas. We’ll hear these names again further into the gospel.

These are the important people of the time. They’re the ones in authority. They hold status, they make decisions, they impact lives. Average people on the street recognize their names. If there were a local newspaper, Tiberius would be on the front page, under the heading world news. Pilate and Herod – they’d generally be in the second section, under local and regional news. Then flip to the religion section, and you’d hear about Annas and Caiaphas.

And maybe deep within the pages of the news, under the caption “human interest story”, you’d possibly see a tiny blurb about the person listed last on Luke’s long list of names. The headline might read, “John the Baptist creates waves in the Jordan River.”

John seems an unlikely choice to be the frontrunner to God’s Messiah. By worldly standards, he is nothing. He has no power, no wealth, no status. He’s just some strange guy, living out in the desert, causing some commotion for the locals.

It seems logical, by worldly standards, that the messenger proclaiming the arrival of God’s Messiah should have been someone with some standing or a position of authority. One of the religious leaders, perhaps. Not some backwater prophet, whose preaching got him into trouble with the local authorities. Apparently John had the unfortunate audacity to publicly denounce Herod’s marriage to his own brother’s wife, so Herod had him locked up in prison and later relieved him of his head.

Luke gives us this list of names before introducing John the Baptist for two reasons. First, it is significant for us to see that God worked out the plan of salvation and redemption in the course of real-world history. This is not just some cosmic drama, or some fairy tale spun

down through the centuries, but it occurred within the progression of world events. It became part of the nitty-gritty of daily life here on earth. Smack dab in the middle of the trials and troubles of real people. This is where the word of God comes calling. Right into the very mess that needed God's redemption most of all. Real humans with real issues.

And secondly, we're given this list of names so that we see the contrast between worldly power and God's power. John is no emperor, or governor, or priest. Yet it is to him that the word of God comes. This is a theme that will recur throughout the message of the gospel. God works through those who are powerless, vulnerable and weak. God chose an unwed teenage girl to give birth to the Christ. Jesus chose lowly fishermen and a tax collector to be his disciples. Those with the weakest voices will be heard. The first shall be last, the last shall be first. And in the end, earthly rulers do not ultimately have the final word. God does.

John the Baptist was God's final prophet. He came out of obscurity. Israel's prophetic voice had been silent for well over four hundred years. Prophets had had a huge role in Israel's history. We sometimes think of prophets as fortune tellers – people who can tell the future. But that is not quite accurate. They don't foretell the future as much as they forth-tell what is going on in the present. Biblical prophets are able to see with great clarity what is going on around them in the present – and generally it was that Israel was falling away from God. The prophet would then speak a word from God that would provoke the people to make a change.

Prophets were able to connect God's word to what was going on in the world. Sometimes they would offer a word of rebuke – for people to change their ways, or else. Sometimes they offered a word concerning the political, economic, social, or religious climate of the time – usually having to do with the need for reform. Often the prophets offered a word of hope and encouragement. Ultimately the words of any prophet were words of God's redemption.

The people of Israel believed that the time of the prophets was long over. In fact, Malachi was considered to be the last prophet of Israel. Like many of the prophetic books of the Bible, the message of Malachi has to do with reform. Malachi proclaimed God was sending a messenger to the people. In order to prepare for the coming messenger of God, Malachi saw a definite need for reform. God's messenger would come with a dual purpose of judgment, cleansing the sins of the people with soap and refining them with fire, not to punish, but to purify them to receive the Lord when he come. John the Baptist had a similar message of repentance.

John, too, was a prophet. He came with a word from God, and he made an assessment of what was going on in the world around him. He saw a corrupt world in need of redemption. John connected the word of God with what he saw happening in the world. So, he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. One was coming from God. One who

would bring salvation and offer redemption. But in order to receive him, the people needed to do some reforming in their lives.

Luke uses the words of another prophet, the prophet Isaiah, to introduce John the Baptist and the significance of his message. Isaiah the prophet uses the image of a highway to portray what God is going to do. He speaks of preparing the way of the Lord by building a straight path. He uses images of leveling mountains and filling in valleys, straightening what is crooked and smoothing that which is rough.

Building a highway is no simple task. It causes disruption and upheaval. Whatever is in the way has to be moved – sometimes that includes homes, businesses, and farms. Obstacles need to be overturned. Holes and valleys need to be filled. Sometimes detours have to be put into place until the project is finished. Building a highway requires lots of planning, and the potential for lots of headaches. Not everyone is going to be happy as disruption is inevitable.

When God's messenger comes into the world, things are going to get turned on their head. Old ways are going to be overthrown. Routines will be challenged. The status quo will no longer be sufficient. Change is inevitable. According to Isaiah, the entire world will feel the impact of what God is going to do. This isn't some fly by night occurrence. God is about to act in on a grand scale, and nothing will stand in the way of that message. All obstacles will be removed that might hinder the coming of the Lord.

The word of God comes to John the Baptist as a word for the entire world. It is a word of God's forgiveness and redemption that is for all people. The way must be prepared, the paths made ready so that the word of God can reach all peoples of the earth. The message does not belong to any one group, but it is a message of forgiveness and redemption for all.

Throughout his ministry, indeed, Jesus will remove the obstacles in people's lives that keep them from hearing his message. He will fill in the low places, in order to bridge the gulf that keeps people separate and oppressed. He will knock down those who are full of themselves with a message of justice, fairness, and equality. Jesus came into a world that so needed a message of forgiveness and redemption. That same message is just as relevant and necessary for our world today.

During the Civil Rights movement Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr preached a prophetic word about what he saw in the world and the changes that needed to be made. Like John the Baptist, King saw the world as it was, and what he saw was a world that needed to repent. We have photographs and grainy video and testimonies that stand as witness to the hatred and racism that existed in that time.

Over 50 years later, with advanced technology, we now have instant access on the internet to video images of the hatred and inequality that exists between people. Every day, new

evidence comes out. With each generation that is born, we see that the human capacity to tear down one another and put up barriers between people is alive and well. And the words of John the Baptist ring true.

From the front lines in war zones, to the camps of refugees in search of safety and shelter, in the brothels of exploited women and children, and in the slums of our major cities. God's message of forgiveness and redemption is needed. In the oncology units of hospitals, the domestic violence shelters of our communities, the overcrowded prison system, and under the bridges where homeless folks gather to keep warm. God's message of forgiveness and redemption is needed.

In a world so divided by intolerance and hatred, so filled with economic disparity and unwillingness to find compromise. God's message of forgiveness and redemption is needed.

In our own fragmented relationships, our struggles with temptation, our family crises, our worries about the future, and our concerns about health and welfare. God's message of forgiveness and redemption is needed.

And so in these cold, dark days of January when we long for the flowers of Spring – let us hear the voice of John crying out in the wilderness, the voice of God's prophet who understands the needs of the world around him and brings God's message of forgiveness and redemption to all people. Let us too share Christ's message of forgiveness and redemption to others in our words and deeds. May all who see us, see also the one who sent us.