

Luke 3:1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the desert,

*‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.*

*⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.*

*The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.*

⁶ And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’”

Dear Friends in Christ,

READY FOR CHRISTMAS?

What was 1985 like? We were only 12 years out of the Vietnam War. Ronald Regan was half-way through his presidency. Microsoft released its first version of Windows. I was on the JV football team. For some reason, that last one didn’t make the list of important events of 1985.

Much has changed in the 30 years since 1985. The passage of time is a tricky thing. Like when you read a book, you have to get used to how time flows in that book. Some books are written to take place in a single day. Others cover years or decades. The Bible is no different in that respect. At points the Bible covers a year or two going on for many pages. Sometimes centuries, literally centuries, pass in a single page.

I. A Message for Uncertain Times

Our text, says, **“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,”** “Just another of those Roman emperor dudes,” we think. **“—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas”** (1-2). A list of meaningless names. But this list is important for a couple reasons. First of all, God is anchoring these events in the fabric of time, in the history of the world. This story of John the Baptist and Jesus is not a “Once upon a time” fairy tale, but a real event which occurred in human history. God did not intend it as any less than a record of the facts.

The other thing this list of rulers in chapter 3 tells us is that thirty years had passed since chapter 2. Perhaps you remember those words from Luke chapter two, **“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken... This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.”** That was about 4BC. At the time of Caesar Augustus, the time of Jesus’ birth, the Jews enjoyed an unusual amount of toleration from the Romans. But in the thirty years between chapters 2 and 3, that had eroded. The Roman state became more centralized. It demanded higher levels of compliance from its conquered people. Under Tiberius Caesar, the ruler mentioned in verse 1 of our reading, the Jews were for the first time persecuted by the Romans.¹

Then there is Pontius Pilate, a cruel and unjust ruler. I am not only speaking of the trial of Jesus. The historical record tells us that Pilate was eventually recalled by the Romans because of his misrule, including at least one massacre.

And then Luke included the names of two high priests. There could, of course, be only one high priest at a time, but two are mentioned. This was because the Romans had removed the Jewish chosen high priest, Annas, and replaced him and at this time the replacement was Caiaphas. So the Jews had the Roman appointee and the one who had been chosen by the Jews. Now the Romans were meddling in Jewish religion.

In time of oppression, senseless violence, state control of their religion, John the Baptist preached that the kingdom of God would soon arrive. To a people oppressed, who certainly talked often of unjust politics and government policy, to those people John came and said, “*But*, how is it between you and God?” Forget all the problems and injustices of this world. “How is it between you and God?”

John’s message was a sign of the kind of Deliverer God’s Chosen One would be. John did not ramp up anti-Roman sentiment. He did not encourage self-rule and autonomy. He did not encourage protests, peaceful or otherwise. His message was not that the foreign powers should stop meddling in Jewish religion. To be prepared for the Messiah is to prepare one’s own heart, to, for a moment, ignore all else in the world.

Imagine hearing John. He was a preacher who could take your eyes off the things of this world, and at least for as long as you were listening to him, you realized that the things of this world, the big things like terrorism, the hot button issues like immigration and gun control, the little things like pet care, nail polish and power tools, you realized that they all vanished into meaninglessness as long as you listened to this man of God. As the Holy Spirit spoke through him, you knew that he spoke the truth about what mattered in life—and it wasn’t what you spent most of your blood, sweat and tears, or your money, leisure and laughter on. What mattered most in life wasn’t what our 24-hour news media, right leaning or left leaning, exhaust themselves chasing. As long as you listened to John you realized that the important thing was what no one was reporting: the important thing was God and your relationship with him.

Like that time Jesus went to the home of two sisters, and there was one of them running around cooking the food, setting the table, folding the napkins, and the second sister just there sitting listening to Jesus’ teach. And frustrated sister #1 says, “Teacher, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?” Sister #1 had a point, you know. Jesus had to eat. It was the reason he was there—they had invited him. Someone had to make the meal.

Like that “responsible” sister we know we have to take care of the realities of life. We have to get a decent education, feed our family, send the kids to college, help out with the grandkids. Yes, yes. We might want to get involved in the political process, debate the issues. Yes, yes. But then there is John the Baptist preaching about the thing most needful. In order for Jesus’ arrival at Christmas to be a blessing, we need to make our heart his home. Oh, we don’t choose Jesus. But we do repent by God’s power.

That was John’s message: in order to be ready for the Messiah, we need to get ready—and getting ready is a whole lot more work than writing a Christmas letter or buying presents. Sure, they need to get done. They keep us so busy that we don’t have time to eat. But they really aren’t the deep down things that matter about Christmas. We get so confused!

II. A Message of Humility

We aren’t the first ones!. The kingdom of God which John the Baptist proclaimed was quite different from what everyone of his day imagined God’s kingdom would look like.

Back in the 1800’s, a Jew named Alfred Edersheim converted to Christianity. A couple of his books are important precisely because he was a Jew. He extensively studied Jewish religious writings from the time of Jesus. His books goes back to primary sources to tell us what the religious people of

Jesus' day thought and expected.

Edersheim points out that nearly every Jew of Jesus' day was expecting an earthly kingdom. They expected a heavenly kingdom on earth resting on the foundation of race. It was thought that when the Messiah came, the Jewish race would be saved, as a whole. It was the popular picture that Abraham (whether this was believed to be literally true or only figuratively true I am not sure) it was popularly believed that Abraham was sitting at the gates of hell to deliver any Israelite who might accidentally have been condemned. It was believed that the Jew, any Jew, even the biggest rascal of a Jew, would have a higher position in the kingdom of the God than the most sincere convert to Judaism.ⁱⁱ This is not to condemn Jews, but to condemn human pride. For if we were convinced and believed that we were God's specially chosen race—as God had said to Abraham, David and others—what race would not fall into such arrogance?!

To such spiritual arrogance, John the Baptist preached. He came shouting, shouting out in the echoes of the barren wilderness. The desert cliffs around the Jordan River rang. He came shouting about the need for a change of heart. His message was not of political and religious freedom that the Savior would bring to an oppressed people. His message was not one of legally protected religious freedom. His message was not a message of earthly victory. His message was a breaking of the heart, sorrowing over sin, admitting our own wrongness, not pointing fingers at others. It was he, this one clothed in the animal skins of a mountain man, who was God's appointed messenger. He shouted that the kingdom of God was coming but not to people who stood on their own merits. The Messiah would come, but not to people who imagined that they had been good enough for God. He came, ***“preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”*** (3). John proclaimed a kingdom which first of all required spiritual repentance; not first of all joy, but first of all sorrow. No one expected that!

His message is equally one for our day. All the big problems that we focus on like the economy and terrorism—put them after daily repentance. John's message of personal internal repentance is the proper lead-up to the great joy of Christmas—which should be great joy! But the proper lead-up to Christmas' joy must be personal spiritual preparation. We must have concern, sorrow, over our sin.

Repentance is not merely a recitation of a few words, or reading a couple lines out of the church bulletin. It is bare-knuckle 15-round fight with sin. Our reading likens it to an equally physical task: road construction. Now when you think of road construction you hear the rumble of huge diesel-driven road graders and bulldozers. But think back 2,000 years and road construction was different. Don't look for drivers sitting in the seats of heavy duty construction equipment. Look for bent backs and sweaty foreheads. Listen and hear the axes chopping the trees, shovels digging into the ground, pick-axes crunching through the rocky earth. It's hard, hard work. Muscles hardened by thousands of daily hefts of a shovel or swings of an ax. That is the picture of repentance.

“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.” (4-6).

In repentance we examine our lives. We look for every excess, every deficiency, every misunderstanding and every bit of spiritual stubbornness. We leave no spiritual stone unturned. And when we have identified those things, we get rid of them.

How? When someone points out a fault, do you go on the offensive and point out the other person's fault? Or do you pretend it never happened? Maybe you resolve, “I'll try harder next time”? What do you do when God's Holy Spirit convicts you of sin? Do you know what God *wants* when our spiritual faults are exposed? He simply wants us to say, “I repent.” He simply desires that we say, “I am sorry. I have sinned. I trust that only Jesus can remove this stain of sin. I want, by your power, God, to leave this sin.”

And all the arguments and defensiveness ends, and you have forgiveness.

Go out to the desert. Listen to John preach. Put all the worldly concerns in a distant second place. Imagine going down into the Jordan for that baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And if you have been baptized, realize that in daily confession and repentance, you are baptized again and again into the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ.

Now you are ready for Christmas. Amen.

ⁱ Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 181-182.

ⁱⁱ Edersheim, 188