

The Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert. ³ He went throughout (the) whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"



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Preparing the way: context

On the previous Sunday, the first Sunday in Advent, we considered a passage taken from the stream of Luke's discourse on the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the signs of the end, warnings about the coming persecutions, the Great Tribulation, and finally the gospel passage about the coming Son of Man (all from Luke 21). The text included: "People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." (Luke 21:26-37). To our modern mind, a rather odd choice for the first Sunday of Advent. But then our modern minds think of Advent as the gateway to prepare for Christmas. And therein lies the problem. As explained previously, Advent begins in the shadow of the celebration of Christ as King of the Universe. Considering that, suddenly the reading for the first week of Advent makes sense - we are to prepare for the Second Coming of Jesus, what the prophets called "the day of the Lord."

At the same we are also to prepare for the first coming of Jesus, born in Bethlehem, the answer to a whole range of prophetic promises that there would come a day when the Lord Himself would come (*cf. Ezekiel*

34) and born to us would be Savior. This is where Luke begins his gospel story. He continues the biblical history of God's dealings with humanity found in the Old Testament showing how God's promises to Israel have been fulfilled in Jesus and how the salvation promised to Israel has arrived. To that end, after the opening Prologue (1:1–4), Luke provides two chapters called the Infancy Narrative (1:5–2:52) which includes well known passages we will indeed encounter during the Weekday Mass readings leading up to Christmas. Those passages include:

- The Announcement of John the Baptist's Birth (1:5–25) to Zechariah
- The Announcement of Jesus' Birth / Annunciation (1:26–38)
- Mary's Visit to Elizabeth / Visitation (1:39–56)
- The Birth of John the Baptist (1:57–80)
- The Birth of Jesus / Nativity (2:1-20)

There are several other stories about Jesus as a child and then Luke closes the beginning with: "*growing Jesus advanced [in] wisdom and age and favor before God and man*" (2:52). We turn the page and read the solemn declaration: "... *the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.*" (3:2)

Locating Our Story

In Luke gospel, we last saw John as a maturing boy in the wilderness, awaiting his public appearance to Israel (1:80). He is still in the wilderness but now at the threshold of his public ministry. He is the "*son of Zechariah,*" a reminder of the awe-inspiring intervention of God leading to the birth of a son to Zechariah and Elizabeth, too old to have children. The mention of Zechariah also ushers back into view the promises to Zechariah from Gabriel and Zechariah's own celebration of God's eschatological visitation, both underscoring John's role in the restoration of Israel (1:14–17, 68–79). With a single verse, "*the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert,*" Luke has laid the groundwork for his depiction of the adult John: he is the one foretold, the divine gift whose birth has already brought honor to his parents, the one who was be "*prophet of the Most High*" (1:76), a role he now fulfills.

With the adult John introduced into the narrative, we then await Jesus, the One designated "*Son of God*" (1:35)—an identity to be affirmed by the Lord (3:21–22), confirmed by Jesus' heritage (3:38), acknowledged by the devil (4:3, 9), and whose identity becomes the very mission of Jesus (4:1–13).

As Joel Green (159-160) points out, in just a few verses, the narrative content woven together in the first chapter of Luke, appear in our account:

- the wilderness;
- the on-going reference to Isaiah 40 which proclaims God's universal salvation;
- The universality of God's desire that all be saved;
- the role of John as one who prepares the way;
- the activity of the Holy Spirit; and
- repentance and forgiveness of sins.

Location in History

¹ *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,* ² *during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.*

The chronological data of these verses reflects the conventions of Greco-Roman historiography as well as a pattern found in some Jewish prophetic books (Jer 1:1-3; Ezek 1:1-3; Hos 1:1; Isa 1:1). Luke seeks to

place his “orderly account” (Lk 1:1) within the context of “world” history. In addition, this writing, addressed to “Most Excellent Theophilus” (Lk 1:3), places the events within the context of the rulers and times (and some historiographic forms) that Theophilus would know. It is likely that he was some type of Roman official.

Even though six different people are named, that doesn’t allow us to pinpoint the exact date that John began his ministry. First of all, our standard time reckoning of “year of the Lord” (A.D.) did not begin until 533 AD. Our year of 365+ days and 12 months was not standard in the first century. There were at least four different calendars back then. Each reckoned the years differently. We can’t be sure how long “15 years” would have been.

Secondly, we are not sure when Tiberius began his reign or when Luke started counting the years. There were two or three years when Tiberius was co-regency with Augustus starting in 11 or 12 AD. Augustus died in 14 AD. Did the counting start in the year 11 or 12 or 14? Our best guess is that Luke refers to a time around 28 AD.

The date ranges of the other rulers (from Culpepper, *Luke New Interpreter’s Bible*):

- Pontius Pilate 26-36 AD
- Herod Antipas 4 BC-39 AD
- Philip 4 BC-34 AD
- Lysanias ruler of Abilene is unknown
- Annas was high priest from 6-15 AD
- Caiaphas was high priest from 18-36 AD [p. 40]

Note that Luke includes both civil and religious leaders in his list. There is also a sense of narrowing the focus: starting with the ruler of the Roman Empire -- nearly the whole world -- and ending up at the temple in Jerusalem -- where the high priests did their work.

What is the significance of this information? First of all, they indicate that the historical context was important to Luke. Secondly, I think that Luke tries to show to Theophilus (and all Roman rulers) that Jesus and the Christians were not subversive to Rome. The charges that Jesus was putting himself up against Caesar were created by Jesus’ enemies (see Lk 23:2; compare to 20:21-25). Thirdly, Luke seeks to speak in a form (language) that Theophilus (Luke’s patron) will understand. He places his Gospel in the form and in the historical context that will make sense to his audience.

The Word of God

Just as in so many instances in the Old Testament, the gravity of the moment is captured, as it is here in Luke, with the direct proclamation: “...*the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.*” The phrase serves to call to the fore the expression in 3:2, “*the word of God came.*” At the beginning of the public ministry Luke ensures we are clear regarding his core and central focus: the action and desire of God in the world. In this he echoes the proclamation from the prophet Isaiah: “*So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; It shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it.*” (Is 55:11) What God has promised, He will achieve in his Son, Jesus.

The phrase clearly identifies the source of divine inspiration behind John’s work but also puts us on notice that Luke’s emphasis on God and “*the word of God,*” as the story’s primary actor will be carried forward and enlarged. This emphasis and focus continues past our gospel passage is notable passages from the early passages in the public ministry chapters: by Jesus (4:4, 8, 12) who is engaged in a process of discerning the way of God, and even by the devil (4:10–11) who tries to garner the authoritative voice of God for his own agenda of frustrating God’s purpose. It culminates the activity of the Holy Spirit,

God's empowering and guiding agent (3:16, 22; 4:1) who will come upon Jesus at his baptism and in the synagogue in Nazareth: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...*" (4:18)

So, we are reminded that, though the narrative spotlight turns first on John before moving onto Jesus, it is the Word of God that is the "main character" - later to be revealed as incarnate in the person of Jesus.

Background for the "Word of God" in Scripture

While we rightly hear the expression "Word of God" and think: Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ, the concept of the "Word of God" for Old Testament people reveals a profound and multifaceted significance, serving as a key aspect of God's interaction with humanity. In the Old Testament, the "Word of God" refers to God's active communication with His people, both in terms of divine revelation and action. Rooted in Hebrew scriptures, this term emphasizes God's authority, power, and relational presence among His creation.

Divine Revelation - In the Old Testament, the "Word of God" often represents divine communication, where God reveals His will and commandments to the people. One of the clearest examples of this is in the covenant at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19–20), where God speaks to Moses and delivers the Ten Commandments. These commandments are not just moral guidelines, but a direct revelation of God's will for how His people should live.

Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel also exemplify this concept. God's word came to them in visions or speech, guiding them to relay His message to the Israelites. In Isaiah 55:11, the prophet declares the power of God's word, saying, "*So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it.*" This underscores the idea that God's word is active and purposeful, never failing to accomplish what God intends.

Power of Creation - The "Word of God" is also depicted as the force behind creation itself. In Genesis 1, God speaks the universe into existence: "Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). Here, God's word is not merely a passive communication but an active, creative force. His spoken word brings life, order, and structure to the cosmos. This highlights the power and authority that God's word carries—it is a dynamic force that shapes reality.

Covenant and Law - The Word of God is deeply intertwined with the Law (Torah), particularly in books like Deuteronomy, where God's word is established as the foundation for the covenant between Him and His people. In Deuteronomy 4:1-2, Moses instructs the Israelites, "*Now, Israel, hear the statutes and ordinances which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live.*" God's word, as given through the Law, is portrayed as life-giving. Obedience to it leads to blessing, while disobedience leads to curses (Deut 28). The word functions as a means of sustaining the relationship between God and Israel, reminding them of His promises and expectations.

Instrument of Judgment: In addition to being a tool for creation and revelation, the Word of God is also depicted as an instrument of judgment. Throughout the prophetic books, God's word often comes as a warning to the people of Israel and other nations, calling them to repentance or facing the consequences of their disobedience. For example, in the book of Jeremiah, God says, "*See, I am now putting my words in your mouth!*" (Jeremiah 1:9). Jeremiah's prophetic message carried divine authority, capable of building up or tearing down kingdoms, nations, and rulers (Jeremiah 1:10). The Word of God is shown as having the power not only to create but also to bring judgment and destruction when people turn away from His commandments.

The Word as Personified Wisdom: In some Old Testament texts, the Word of God is closely associated with the concept of divine wisdom. In Proverbs, wisdom is portrayed as being with God from the beginning of creation: “*The LORD begot me, the beginning of his works, the forerunner of his deeds of long ago*” (Proverbs 8:22). Although this is not a direct reference to the “Word of God,” it implies a parallel concept—God’s wisdom or Word was present at creation and guides all of life according to divine order.

Mission of the Baptist: Repentance

“*He went throughout (the) whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” (Luke 3:3)

The basic meaning of the verb *baptizo* is “to wash,” which is how it is translated in Luke 11:38 (re: ritual washing before meals). The word often also carries, in context, ritual or purifying aspects to the washing. This image is used by Luke in Acts 22:16: “*Get up, and have yourself baptized (baptisai) and your sins washed away (apolouo), calling on his name.*” When one surveys the reports in the Gospels concerning John’s baptism (Mark 1:2–6), the origin and significance of which was debated (Matt 21:25; Mark 11:30; Luke 20:4), one notices:

- a) John’s action of baptizing with water and his association of baptism with the preaching of repentance (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3);
- b) the actions of the people and of the tax collectors in going out to John (Matt 3:7) “*to be baptized by him*” (Luke 3:7, 12; Matt 3:5f.; Mark 1:5); and
- c) the Baptist’s hope that God would respond to repentance with the gift of forgiveness and purification.

Consequently, when the people and the tax collectors were baptized, they acknowledged thereby the critique which touched their lives (Luke 3:1–14) and “*acknowledged the righteous [dikaioo] of God*” (7:29). On the opposite side stood “the Pharisees and the lawyers.” Since they were not baptized by John, they “*rejected the plan of God for themselves*” and brought upon themselves the judgment of God (7:30).

John’s baptism put one on God’s side – perhaps even in a right relationship with God (a possible meaning for *dikaioo*) – even for the tax collectors. Refusing John’s baptism was a rejection of God’s purpose, even for those who lived moral, obedient lives. (Note: as important as Luke makes John’s baptism, he also makes a clear distinction in his Gospel and in Acts, between John’s baptism and the baptism directed by Jesus (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 11:16; 18:25; 19:3-5)).

There is a geographical bend to John’s baptizing in the region of the Jordan. In an area just north of the Dead Sea is Al-Maghtas, what we Christians know as “Bethany beyond the Jordan” (in modern day Jordan). It is in the wilderness even today. In Deuteronomy 34, Moses reached the precipice of Mt. Nebo overlooking Al-Maghtas and at last could look into Canaan, the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. Moses looked over and beyond the Jordan River into the place of promise that the righteous would inherit. Tradition holds that this was the place where Joshua led the people of Israel into Canaan, crossing the Jordan River. This is the place where Elijah was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot (ref: Luke 1:17). This is the place where John cried out to prepare the way of the Lord and baptized for repentance of sin – and to renew the covenant with God – crossing over into promise as did their ancestors with Joshua – entering into righteousness.

“Repentance” and “repenting” are important words in Luke/Acts. The verb occurs in these books 14 times and the noun 11 times, accounting for ~50% of the usage in the NT. For Luke, repentance is the most important characteristic of Christians. The Greek word group *metanoeo/metanoia* is a combination of a word for “mind” (*noeo/nous*) and a prefix (*meta*) meaning “after” = “after-thought” or “second thoughts”;

or meaning “change” = “change in one’s mind or thinking (upon reflection)”. Key for the NT understanding of the word is OT *šûb* (“turning around,” in the sense of a turning away from present things and returning to the point of departure). The LXX (Septuagint) translates *šûb* as *metanoeo/metanoia* almost without exception.

In John’s baptism for repentance, one can easily connect the baptism with a broader call for the people of Israel to return to the “point of departure” – to return to the very place at which they entered the promised land as covenant people of God. Now they need to “turn away” from all that would hold them from or drive them away from the covenant, the righteousness of God.

As Green notes (171), “John follows biblical precedent in insisting on the correlation of cleansing and moral rectitude. Second, his emphasis on repentance signals his understanding that the status quo of his socio-historical environment has been found wanting. As such, his message constitutes a prophetic appeal for people to turn their backs on previous loyalties and align themselves fundamentally with God’s purpose. Third, by definition the forgiveness of sins has a profound communal dimension; as sin is the means by which persons exclude themselves from community with and the community of God’s people, so forgiveness marks their restoration to the community.”

The Call of the Prophet

⁴ *as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one crying out in the desert: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*

Luke casts the call of John the Baptist in the form of an Old Testament prophetic call with reference to the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3-5). Luke presents the theme of the universality of salvation, which he has announced earlier in the words of Simeon (2:30-32). Moreover, in describing the expectation of the people (3:15), Luke is characterizing the time of John’s preaching in the same way as he had earlier described the situation of other devout Israelites in the infancy narrative (2:25-26, 37-38). Later, in 3:7-18 Luke presents the preaching of John the Baptist who

- urges the crowds to reform in view of the coming wrath (Luke 3:7, 9: eschatological preaching),
- offers the crowds standards for reforming social conduct (Luke 3:10-14: ethical preaching), and
- announces to the crowds the coming of one mightier than he (Luke 3:15-18: messianic preaching).

Luke is keenly interested in the impact his gospel story will have not simply on the world as *kosmos* – the world, that is, conceived most generally – but also on the world as *oikoumene* – the world as it is constituted by the political, economic, and religious powers. John’s preaching of repentance, because it will literally turn people away from the powers that be to the Lord, threatens those invested in the present order.

The advent of the one John anticipates will not only straighten paths, but also fill valleys, bring down mountains, straighten what is crooked, and smooth that which is rough (3:5). In this light, it is perhaps not surprising that further on in the story, John’s preaching will ultimately lead to his beheading by one of those named in Luke 3:1, while Jesus will still later be crucified by another. Those who are threatened by repentance and forgiveness, after all, will not go without a fight.

The verses about the transformation of the ups and downs, and sideways-ness of life into straight and smooth and level paths may point to the idea of reversal. That is, the rich become poor and the poor become rich. But perhaps it can be understood as the great leveling by which Luke intends a meaning of equality. That is, the rich and poor meet in the middle. I think that part of this equality is Luke’s emphasis

that in God's kingdom (and church) human differences don't matter. There will be rich and poor. There will be slaves and free. There will be males and females. There will be young and old. There will be Jews and Gentiles. All are invited. We might say, there is a level playing field for all people.

This thought is emphasized in the last line of the quote: "*All flesh shall see the salvation of God.*" Luke stresses the universal aspect of God's salvation.

The only other time this particular word for "salvation" is used (*soterion*) in all of the gospels, is when Simeon sings: "*...my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in the sight of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel*" (2:30-32). What did Simeon see when he declared he had seen God's salvation? He had seen the infant Jesus and there was a change in Simeon's thinking about death.

Later in the gospel a closely related word is used (*soteria*) when Jesus tells Zacchaeus, "*Today salvation has come to this house*" (19:9). What had come to his house? Jesus had invited himself over and there was change in Zacchaeus' thinking about wealth. It is the power of the encounter with Jesus – the condition for the possibility of seeing salvation.

A Closing Thought

The opening of our gospel passage is a list of whos-who for the time: emperors, governors, kings, and even the high priest of the Jerusalem Temple. But to none of those did the Word of God come. Rather the Word came to an unknown prophet "*strong in spirit, [who] was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel.*" (2:80). In this backwater, a small corner of the world, began the redemptive efforts that were the fulfillment of God's promises to His people and the world. It did not begin among the elite nor among great fanfare, but almost silently among those on the margins.

This is the model for the Church.

God's redemptive work is not complete in this time between the "comings of Christ." The Word of God is entrusted to the Church and its people - just as it was to Israel. And the action plan remains as it ever was: "*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*" at the margins, working every inward to change the heart of people, of the community, of the nations, and all people to the ends of the earth.

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