

The Advent of Jesus

Setting the Stage for Jesus

Luke 3:1-6

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Scripture

Today is the *Second Sunday of Advent*. We are focusing our attention during this Advent Season on one of the Scripture Readings read during Advent. And so today's text is Luke 3:1-6.

I have spent many wonderful hours studying this remarkable passage. I wish we could spend the rest of Advent looking at this marvelous portion of God's Word as it contains many rich truths. But, I will simply direct your attention to some of the highlights.

Let's read Luke 3:1-6:

¹ **In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias 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 wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,**

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

**‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.**

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

**and the crooked shall become straight,
and the rough places
shall become level ways,**

⁶ **and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”**

(Luke 3:1–6)

¹ The material for this sermon is from John MacArthur's online series of messages on Luke 3:1-6.

Introduction

Luke is a gifted author and historian. He sets the stage for the arrival of Jesus with a masterful economy of words and presentation of details.

Luke begins his Gospel alternating events between John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah (who is John's cousin). So, after his prefatory dedication to Theophilus (1:1-4), Luke writes about the prediction of John's birth (1:5-25), and then about the prediction of Jesus' birth (1:26-38).

After Jesus' mother Mary's visits John's mother Elizabeth (1:39-56), Luke tells about John's birth (1:57), and then about Jesus' birth (2:1-7).

After the account of John's birth, Luke says about John, "And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel" (1:80). And after the account of Jesus' birth, Luke says about Jesus, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (2:52).

Then Luke introduces the public ministry of each cousin. John and Jesus undoubtedly knew each other. It is likely that they visited each other, as cousins often do. It is likely that John knew that Jesus was sent from God, and that Jesus knew that John was to be the last and greatest prophet in Israel. So, Luke introduces the ministry of John (3:1-22), and then introduces the ministry of Jesus (4:14-15).

Lesson

In today's text Luke introduces the ministry of John the Baptist. John the Baptist is really setting the stage for Jesus. Because Luke is a careful historian, he wants to set the scenery on the stage before Jesus steps onto center stage. With just a few words Luke paints a masterful tapestry that sets the stage for Jesus' ministry.

I. The Historical Setting (1:1-2a)

First, notice the historical setting.

Luke gives us seven names, knowing that his readers will study their names to understand their historical setting better. And so we read in Luke 1:1-2a, **“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.”**

These were terrible times for the people of God in Israel. They were living under the oppressive rule of the Roman Emperor **Tiberius Caesar**. His predecessor, Augustus, who was the Caesar at the time when Jesus was born, died on August 19 in 14 AD. That is when **Tiberius Caesar** became the Roman Emperor. And so, **the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar** would be 29 AD. Although there is some dispute about that date, many scholars put that year as the start of John’s public ministry.

Life in Israel at the time was utterly miserable for the Jews. They lived under the tremendously oppressive rule of **Tiberius Caesar**, who was a tough leader. He was involved in treason and sedition. He was a pagan who promoted himself as a god. He was cruel, self-centered, narcissistic, egotistic, and a megalomaniac. He ruled for 23 years, and in his later years he apparently became demented. He became increasingly cruel, and the last part of his rule has been called “a reign of terror.” He had supreme control over the Roman world and was the worst possible leader for the Jews.

Next, the second name Luke tells us about is **Pontius Pilate**, who was **governor of Judea**. His name is familiar to us because he plays such a prominent role in the crucifixion of Jesus. He was appointed prefect, which is **governor of Judea**, in 26 AD by Tiberius Caesar, and he governed for 10 years. Now, it is helpful to keep in mind that the Roman Emperors had divided the lands they had conquered into various regions, which were then governed by

people they appointed or approved. **Judea** was the region surrounding Jerusalem, and **Pontius Pilate** was the **governor** of this region.

Now, **Pontius Pilate** had a reputation of being implacable, inflexible, self-willed, and wicked. One writer says that his rule was characterized by briberies, insults, robberies, outrageousness, frequent executions without trial and endless savageness. And, of course, he was involved in the crucifixion of Jesus.

The third name Luke gives us is **Herod**, who was **tetrarch of Galilee**. Strictly, a **tetrarch** was a governor over a quarter of a province, but the word denotes governor over a province generally. This **Herod** was one of the sons of Herod the Great who ruled from 37 BC to 4 AD. This **Herod**, who was **Herod Antipas**, ruled from 4 AD until 39 AD, and so he ruled during entire lifespan of both John and Jesus. Herod was an Idumean, that is, he was a descendant of Esau. And so, he was not a Jew but a pagan Gentile.

It was this **Herod** who was involved in the execution of Jesus. The Jews hated **Herod** because he was so wicked. He built a city in honor of Tiberius Caesar and called it Tiberius. Nothing wrong with that except that he built the city on a Jewish cemetery. And then **Herod** put idols in public places. His devotion to Rome was so strong that he did whatever Rome wanted. Further, **Herod** had John the Baptist beheaded because of a promise to a girl who had seduced him and his company by her dancing by saying that he would give her anything she wanted (cf. Matthew 14:1-12).

The fourth name Luke mentions is Herod's **brother Philip**, who was **tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis**, which is northeast of the Sea of Galilee. **Philip** ruled from 4 BC until 34 AD. While all Herod the Great's sons are bad, I suppose it could be said that **Philip** was the best of the bad sons, mainly because we don't know a whole lot about him!

The fifth name Luke tells us about is **Lysanias, tetrarch of Abilene**. He is the only Texan in the group! You may have thought that Abilene is in Texas, and it is, but it is actually a Bible name. **Abilene** is north of Galilee and west of Damascus.

Now, let me pause for a moment to comment on these five names that Luke gives us. Tiberius Caesar had supreme rule over the entire land, and then there were four petty governors. It is important to note that they were all Gentiles. They were not Jews. They were all sinful and wicked to one degree or another. And they all had some power over the people of God, the Jews.

The Jews were living under foreign rulers who were tough, cruel, and despotic. The Jews were living under foreign occupation of their land. They were oppressed. They were occupied. They were in bondage to the most powerful, most perverse, most petty, and most idolatrous Gentiles. The Jews were not realizing the covenant promises that God had made to his people over the years.

And if you think these Gentiles were bad, let me now tell you about the two Jewish names that Luke mentions.

Luke tells us that the Gentile rulers governed **during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas**. Now this is fascinating. And the reason it is fascinating is because there was only supposed to be one high priest at a time. But Luke tells us about **the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas**. What is going on here?

God originally established that there would be only one high priest at a time. Further, the high priest would be a descendant of Levi. But during the Roman rule the Levitical line was ignored. During the Roman occupation of Israel the Romans appointed the high priest. They approved and appointed the high priest. And usually a priest became high priest by currying favor with Rome. Historians believe that the office of high priest was either sold to the highest bidder or was granted as some kind of political favor.

We don't know anything about the lineage of **Annas** or **Caiaphas**. Most likely **Annas**, who was the older of the two and also father-in-law to **Caiaphas**, procured the office of high priest through money or Roman favor. In either case, he became high priest because he served the purposes of Rome and not the purposes of God.

Now, **Annas** had a death grip on the **high priesthood**. Remember that Caesar Tiberius was the most powerful person in the

world. The four governors in the divided land of Palestine had a certain amount of power in the area in which they served. That power was delegated to them by Caesar Tiberius.

But the real power over the Jewish people was not Gentile power but Jewish power as represented in the **high priesthood**. The most powerful leader in the Jewish structure was the high priest. He was the real power in Jewish lives because he represented God to the people. The **high priesthood** had been ordained by God, and the people submitted to that leadership.

Now, the Gentile rulers did terrible things to the Jews. But, it was nothing in comparison to what the Jewish rulers did to the people. **Annas** was high priest from 7 to 14 AD. Then, he was rapidly succeeded by his five sons before his son-in-law, **Caiaphas**, became high priest in 17 AD, and was high priest until 37 AD.

Sometimes, a title is retained after an individual leaves office. So, for example, we still refer to former presidents as “President.” That respect could be what is in play here with **Annas** but clearly there is more. Luke wants us to understand that **Annas** is really the power behind the **high priesthood**. So, for example, when the Jews arrested Jesus, they did not take him to **Caiaphas**, who was the high priest at that time, but the text says, “First they led him to **Annas**” (John 18:13).

And frankly, the **high priesthood** operated like a New York mob crime family. **Annas** was the Mafioso boss of the Jewish **high priesthood** in Jerusalem. Everything went through him. And the basic financial operation of the **high priesthood** was conducted in the Temple. **Annas**, his sons, and his son-in-law **Caiaphas**, ran an incredibly profitable and lucrative business.

You see, when the Jewish people came to the Temple to worship they had to give offerings and sacrifices.

Regarding the offerings, there were thirteen trumpet-shaped receptacles around the wall of the Court of the Women in the outer court. And that is where they people gave their offerings. When they came to the Temple from all around the world to give their offerings they had Roman coins. The office of the **high priesthood**

said that the people could not deposit Roman coins into the receptacles because the image of Caesar on the coin constituted idolatry. So, the people had to exchange their Roman coins for Jewish coins, which were of course acceptable to place in the offertory receptacle. But how did a Jew get his Roman coins exchanged for Jewish coins. Why, through money-changers, of course. And these money-changers were licensed by the **high priesthood**, and they charged exorbitant exchange rates. This was a wonderful stream of revenue for the **high priesthood**.

Further, when the people came to give their sacrifices, they had to bring an animal, usually a lamb. The animal, of course, had to be unblemished. The Jews travelled long distances to get to Jerusalem with their animals. They would take their animal, which they believed was unblemished, to the priest who would inspect it. The priest would examine the animal and say that the animal was blemished, and therefore could not be used. But, he pointed them to flock of pre-certified animals, which the Jew could then purchase—again at an exorbitant cost. Eventually, Jews would not bother bringing their animals to the Temple, but just bring their money, knowing that they were going to pay a whole lot more than the animal was really worth. But that is how the system worked, and the **high priesthood** made a tremendous amount of money.

Now, the reason the **high priesthood** was so mad at Jesus was not so much that he claimed to be God. Others had done that, and it had not really bothered them. But Jesus chased out the money-changers and the people who sold the pre-certified animals out of the Temple on not one but on two occasions (John 2:13-17; Matthew 21:12-13). And it was this action that incensed the **high priesthood**, and they acted just like any mob would, and planned to get rid of Jesus, which they eventually did.

So, these two men, **Annas and Caiaphas**, were rotten to the core. They really did not care about God, and they really did not care about the people. All they cared about was themselves, their power, the position, and their steady stream of income.

II. The Vocational Setting (3:2b)

Next, I want you to notice the vocational setting.

Luke said in Luke 3:2b, “. . . **the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah.**”

John had grown up in private obscurity for 30 years. We know nothing about **John** from his birth until now. He was living in the wilderness. By now his parents, who were already old when he was born, had almost certainly died. And out of nowhere, as it were, Luke says that **the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah.**

Keep in mind that God has not spoken to his people for over 400 years. And suddenly, out of nowhere, as it were, **the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah.**

It is important to note that Luke uses language that any Jew would understand. Throughout the entire Old Testament, a prophet was introduced by the phrase, “The word of the Lord came to. . . .” Virtually every Old Testament prophet was introduced this way. And John, of course, was the last and greatest of the Old Testament prophets. And so, let us pay attention to his message.

III. The Geographical Setting (3:2c)

Third, notice the geographical setting.

Luke says that the word of God came to John **in the wilderness** (3:2c).

Luke is simply alerting us to the fact that John was not part of the religious or political or social establishment. He did not go to an Ivy League school and he did not party with the “in” crowd.

John was living in a remote and barren place. His diet consisted of what he could forage off the land—locusts and wild honey. He wore skins, no doubt of animals that he had killed for food and clothing. But, it was in that setting that God called him to begin his ministry.

IV. The Theological Setting (3:3)

Fourth, notice the theological setting.

Luke said in Luke 3:3, **“And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”**

John proclaimed that God forgives sinners. That is the essence of the gospel.

The Jewish people to whom John came were astonished by his message. They thought that they were pretty good people. They thought that they were doing the right things in their religion. They thought that they were on good terms with God. They thought that the Gentiles—those outside their religious establishment—were the ones who had the problem.

But John came along and essentially said, “You think you are right with God, but you are not. You think you need to try just a little bit harder and God will accept you, but he won’t. You think your religion counts for something, but it doesn’t. What you need is to recognize that you are a sinner. You need to recognize that all your righteous deeds are like filthy rags. You need to recognize that unless you repent, you will perish in hell for all eternity.”

Further, John preached, “And when you repent, God will forgive you. God cannot accept you unless you repent. But when you come to him and repent of your sin, he will forgive you.”

That was John’s message. And that is the gospel. The gospel is good news for those who repent. The gospel is not only about faith in Jesus. It includes repentance.

And repentance is a complete turn-around. It is not merely being sorry for sin. It is recognizing that your sin has offended a holy and righteous God. It is recognizing that you no longer want to have anything to do with your sin. It is a 180 degree turn.

Interestingly, John’s baptism was unusual. The only people who were baptized in those days were Gentiles. They were baptized when they converted to Judaism. And what John is saying is that the Jews need to recognize their sin, and they need to repent of

it, just like the Gentiles need to do, and be baptized as a sign of their conversion. This was really a remarkable thing in John's ministry. He was saying that the Jews were just as much in need of forgiveness as the Gentiles were.

And for people in church today, we remind ourselves that we live moment by moment by faith in Jesus Christ and in repentance of our sins.

V. The Prophetical Setting (3:4-6)

Finally, and briefly, notice the prophetical setting.

Luke says Luke 3:4-6, **“As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘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 become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’””**

Luke quotes the prophet Isaiah. So much should be said about these verses, but I don't have time. Let's just notice that Luke applies the words of Isaiah to the work of John the Baptist.

In those days, when a king went to visit a city, the people were told to get ready for the arrival of the king. They were to fix the roads, and make sure that everything was prepared for the arrival of the king.

In a similar way, John's ministry was to go before Jesus and tell the people, “Your King is coming! Get ready for his arrival!”

Conclusion

Advent is about getting ready for the arrival of the king. And you do so by repenting of your sins so that you can receive the forgiveness of God. I pray that you will do so today. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAAYER:

Our Father in heaven, we thank you for the ministry of John the Baptist. You teach us so much about the way in which he set the stage for the ministry of Jesus.

Help us to repent of our sin so that we may receive the forgiveness of God.

And for all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.