

July 8, 2018  
Sunday Morning Service  
Series: Luke  
Community Baptist Church  
643 S. Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
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*To Ponder . . .*

Questions to ponder as we prepare to hear from Luke 3:1-20.

1. How does Luke's record of various rulers encourage us (vv.1,18-20)?
2. Explain how both Annas and Caiaphas could be called "the high priest."
3. Why do you think God sent John into the wilderness?
4. What is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins?
5. Explain John's "road work" in a spiritual sense.

### **CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS**

#### **Luke 3:1-20**

We recently celebrated two holidays that might have served to draw vivid contrasts between idealism and reality. As we celebrated Memorial Day and Independence Day, we recalled the incredible sacrifices that our forefathers made in order to win our freedoms. But in light of real life, in light of ongoing protests, litigation, and ceaseless pressure from liberal, socialist movements, we might wonder which freedoms our forefathers died to assure for us. Did they die so that we can be free to be enslaved to sexual perversion? Did they die so that we can be free to kill innocent babies? Did they die so that we can be free to engage in life-altering, culture-destroying habits? Or did they die so that we can be free to proclaim the

wonderfully Good News that Christ the Savior has come to rescue us from slavery to sin and give us eternal life?

There is no doubt that our culture is in the worse mess it has ever been in. Rulers seem powerless to stop crime. The most influential groups and people seem bent on destroying our nation's moral, cultural, and financial fiber. The very people who are supposed to be exposing error and danger seem to be the driving force behind covering truth and preaching error. They who are supposed to report news without bias prefer to push and preach the socialists' agenda.

What are we to do? Luke helps us greatly in this matter. When he introduced the ministry of Jesus by introducing the ministry of John, he went to great lengths to point out the corruption of the culture in that day. On one hand, Luke was doing what Luke did well by establishing clear evidence about when Jesus began His ministry. On the other hand, while he established the time of Jesus's ministry, he also gave us good insight into the nature of the times. The rulers and officials Luke named to attest to a time, also reveal to us what the culture must have been like.

We can understand Luke's evidence by this example. Anyone who is familiar with English history can tell you that there was a world of difference for Christians between the reign of Mary Tudor (Bloody Mary) and Queen Elizabeth I. Mention their names and you say a lot about the culture associated with their reigns. The same is true about the names Luke mentioned here.

Luke fixes a time for us that reminds us that Jesus and John both came on the scene after a lifetime of silence and seclusion. We just finished studying that *John grew and became strong* while living in the seclusion of the wilderness (Luke 1:80). And *Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man* (Luke 2:52) while living in the backwoods hills of Nazareth.

But one day, after thirty years of seclusion, God's timing was complete, and John burst on the scene preaching to prepare the way for Jesus. He preached in a wicked and sinful culture like our own. He preached the need for repentance from sin. He preached that repentance from and forgiveness of sin carries revealing characteristics. He preached that where the evidential fruit is missing, there is no reason to believe repentance and forgiveness has occurred.

This was the way to introduce the Good News that Jesus was coming. It is the same message we need to declare as we preach the Good News that Jesus is coming again!

### **The Wilderness: Spiritually and Geographically (vv.1-3a).**

The preacher preached in a spiritual wilderness. Luke pointed out in the first verse some of the ungodly men who ruled the secular world. *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 (v.1).*

Tiberius was the Caesar of Rome, the emperor. Luke used this emperor to pinpoint the beginning of John's crying in the wilderness as the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius. When was that? We know that Caesar Augustus, the Caesar at the time of Jesus's birth (Luke 2:1), died August 19, A.D. 14. But we also know that Tiberius began a co-regency with Augustus in A.D. 11. Add fifteen years to A.D. 11 and we conclude that John began to preach in A.D. 26. Added to this evidence is the fact that Jesus began His public ministry at about age 30 according to Luke 3:23. We know that Jesus was born before Herod's death in 4 B.C. which would put Him beginning His ministry in late A.D. 26 about age 30. Tiberius was no saint. He lived as wickedly as any of the emperors.

Then there was Pontius Pilate who was governor of Judah. We know from secular data that Tiberius appointed Pilate as governor of Judea in A.D. 26. We know from historical accounts that Pilate was arrogant, proud, insecure, brutal, and capricious. He was no friend of the Jews and kept peace in Jerusalem only through ruling with an iron fist. He was subsequently removed from office in A.D. 36 and disappeared from public life. Some conclude that he was ordered to Rome where he was fired and ultimately committed suicide.

Luke also referred to Herod who was the tetrarch. This reference to Herod should cause us to stop to think about those sons of Herod the Great who were regional rulers in the days of Jesus and shortly thereafter. They were as corrupt as anyone can imagine.

Herod the Great was king when Jesus was born. His reign was granted by Mark Antony and included all Judea as well as areas to the

north into Syria. He began to reign in 37 B.C. and died in 4 B.C. Herod tried to ingratiate the Jewish people to himself by the incredible remodeling of the second temple, which came to be known as Herod's temple, the temple where we found Jesus in Luke 2. This was the Herod connected with Jesus's birth, the king who ordered the slaughter of innocent babies in Bethlehem because he feared the birth of the "new king" according to the magi's revelation.

When Herod the Great died in 4 B.C., his kingdom was split between his four sons, which gives us the meaning of "tetrarch" – one of four rulers. Luke listed two of those sons here. Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee. This is Herod the Tetrarch who Luke mentioned in verses 19-20. *But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done (v.19).*

This is the story: Antipas had divorced his wife who was the daughter of the Nabatean king Aretas IV, a typical arranged political marriage. Antipas divorced her so that he could marry his cousin Herodias, the daughter of his brother Aristobulus. At the time, she was the wife of Antipas's other brother Philip, who was actually her Uncle Philip I. Yes, the Herod family was a real mess.

Well, John confronted the king about his sin which probably indicates that he came out of the wilderness for awhile. Herod Antipas put John in prison, which we know from John's account was after Jesus had begun His ministry. Thus, Luke recorded, *Added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison (v.20).* As a favor to Herodias's daughter, who performed a sensual dance for Antipas's guests, he ordered John to be beheaded.

We are probably not too surprised to learn that Herod Antipas was also the Herod to whom the religious leaders took Jesus during His crucifixion trials (Luke 23:6-12). Eventually, this wicked ruler got caught up in a rebellion and was exiled by Emperor Caligula to Gaul in 37 where he died.

Luke also mentioned Herod Philip II who was tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis. He renamed the town of Panias, Caesarea Philippi. You will remember that this was the place where Peter made the great confession about Jesus being the Christ the Son of God (Matthew 16:16). Philip II was also a son of Herod the Great. He married Salome, the daughter of his uncle Philip who he birthed

through Herodias, the woman Antipas stole. He died shortly after Jesus ascended to heaven (A.D. 34).

Also, Luke connected the beginning of John's ministry with Lysanias who was tetrarch of Abilene. We do not have much information about this tetrarch. As far as we can tell, his kingdom was a small area in northern Syria centered around Damascus. His kingdom was given to Herod Agrippa I around A.D. 37. Agrippa I is the Herod who killed James (Acts 12:2) and imprisoned Peter intending to kill him (Acts 12:2). The Lord struck him down, eaten by worms (Acts 12:23). He bequeathed the kingdom to his son Agrippa II, the king before whom Paul gave his testimony, who died c.a. 90, the last ruler from Herod's family.

What a sinful, wicked mess the world was in. John cried out to prepare the way for the only hope of such a wicked world. If the world has changed at all since then, it has only grown worse. Do we declare the Good News that there is a Savior from sin?

Luke also point out that ungodly men ruled the religious world too. He wrote that John's ministry began *during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas (v.2a)*. Annas had served as High Priest A.D. 6-15. He was appointed to the position by Quirinius who ruled over the newly formed Roman province of Judea. He was fired in 15 by the procurator Gratus.

That corrupt government officials who enforced emperor worship could appoint and unappoint the spiritual leaders who were supposed to lead temple worship speaks volumes about how far from God's righteousness even the religious community was. And history tells the story that the high priest's office was totally corrupt. Though deposed from office, Annas held strong influence. Five of his sons served as high priests during the years 15-18. Caiaphas was his son-in-law.

We know that Annas was arrogant, incorrigible, and greedy. He gained fabulous wealth from the temple merchants also known as Annas's Bazaar. He took a cut from the "approved" sheep and animals sold for sacrifices. He took a cut from the money changers who exchanged foreign currency for the temple shekel with which people paid their temple tax. Jesus disrupted this bazaar twice which brought the ire of Annas.

The son-in-law of Annas, Caiaphas, reigned as high priest A.D. 18-36. Valarius Gratus, Pilate's predecessor, who had fired Annas, also appointed Caiaphas to the office of high priest. His long tenure indicates that he was politically savvy. He was in charge of the Sanhedrin who tried Jesus in an illegal court proceeding. He told the council that it was expedient for one man to die for the nation (John 18:14).

The culture into which John stepped to proclaim the coming of Christ was exceedingly corrupt politically and religiously, which is a good indication that it was corrupt throughout. As go the leaders, so go the citizens. When kings and presidents live above the law and despise authorities, we should not be surprised to see the nightly news overflowing with evidence that citizens do the same. Such was John's culture. Such is ours.

Luke tells us that the preacher preached not only in a spiritual wilderness, but he preached in a geographic wilderness. John preached the message that God gave to him in that *the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah (2b)*. John did not preach what he considered to be a message that would attract crowds. He did not set out to proclaim a "feel good" popular message. He was a prophet, a "mouth piece," that God had chosen specifically to declare the message of preparation for Messiah. Like the prophets who preceded him in the Old Testament, John received his message from God and declared it accurately.

Where he preached the message does not make sense to us brilliant humans. John preached *in the wilderness (2c)*. *And he went into all the region around the Jordan (3a)*. We are quite sure that John preached on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Why? It seems obvious that God intentionally sent him to a region that would not naturally attract people. In spite of that situation, thousands of people showed up to hear God's messenger. God was revealing that preparation for the King of Kings was His work for His appointed King.

### **The Message (vv.3b-9).**

The preacher prepared the way of the Lord (vv.3b-6). What message did John preach that prepared the way for Jesus Christ? He

preached identification with repentance for forgiveness. The last part of verse three states that John was *proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (v.3b)*. That does not mean that John preached that baptism brought forgiveness of sins. No one can be forgiven of sin through works of righteousness. Surely John believed the truth we find in Paul's statement to Titus, *He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior (Titus 3:5-6)*. No one is even convicted of sin apart from the grace of God that reveals the problem.

John was preaching identification (that is what *baptism* is) with repentance. Repentance comes only when God graciously reveals sin, reveals that we are at odds with Him. Repentance is the result of seeing our sin and hating our sin. God drives the repentance, and by grace forgives us when we say the same thing He says about our sins (*confession*). Multitudes were coming out to the wilderness to hear this sermon.

John was preaching repentance and forgiveness because he preached the message of preparation (vv.4-6). Luke wrote that John was fulfilling Isaiah's promise. *As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet (v.4a)*. God had promised this very thing 700 years earlier. Now God was bringing His promise to pass in precise detail by His messenger preparing the way for salvation. Isaiah had written: *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" (vv.4b-6)*.

This is the picture of a king entering a city with all pomp and majesty. All along the way, preparation was made to remove all impediments. Maybe even the road would be repaired where necessary. But preparation for King Jesus was radically miraculous. The "road work" involved straightening out crooked places in the road. It involved leveling mountains, filling valleys, smoothing rough places. No one had ever witnessed this kind of preparation for an earthly king.

The "road work" John was doing was spiritual. God's message of repentance and forgiveness was the road work of preparation. God's message still assaults all sin and evil and knocks down every resistance. God's message radically changes your life. It smooths out the spiritual rough places, levels the spiritual hills, and fills the spiritual valleys. No one ever experiences the grace of God through the message of repentance and forgiveness and then goes on through life as if nothing changed. Everything changes when God does this work.

That is why the preacher's message confronted sinners (vv.7-9). He declared that the people in the crowds needed to show evidence of repentance. *He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (vv.7-8a)*.

Why was John so blunt, so direct, apparently so uncaring? Don't forget, this was God's message. Therefore, we need to ask, "Why is God so direct, so blunt, so apparently uncaring?" God's message is direct because God has a perfect assessment of the human soul's rebellion. We are born in rebellion against God our creator. We live in rebellion against Him who must be our king. We continually throw God off the throne of our hearts and then go about life as if we are nice people. We are as deceiving and deadly as any viper!

God's message to us vipers is that His wrath against our rebellion is hanging over us, about to engulf us at any moment. God's message of grace begs us to yield to the conviction He brings, acknowledge our rebellion, turn away from it (repent), and live like we have repented. God's message is a plea for us to yield to His grace, be saved from sin, and live like it.

Therefore, if we are going to truly face our sin and truly confess our sin and truly repent to be truly forgiven, we need to abandon confidence in meaningless traditions. So John preached, *And do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (vv.8b-9)*. About the time our souls begin to sense our great need to repent and be forgiven, our flesh rises up and defends our sinful rebellion.

The Jews demonstrated this error regularly. They, based on the teaching of Pharisees, would argue that they were not sinners because they were God's chosen people through Abraham. They were just like religious people today who might argue that they are okay because they were baptized or christened as children. Such people are quite sure their church will save them, their good works will be sufficient. God's message still proclaims that all works of righteousness are insufficient except the work of Jesus Christ to redeem us.

### **The Response (vv.10-20).**

The crowds wondered what they should do (vv.10-14). They asked good questions about repentance of sin. The "vipers" asked him, "What then shall we do?" (v.10). This is the natural and expected response. When we realize we are in rebellion, we want to know how to change. More specifically, the *Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"* (v.12). And the *Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?"* (v.14).

John responded to these questions with answers that reveal the characteristics of repentance. Fruits of repentance help the helpless. *Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise* (v.11). Repentance fruit looks like honesty. To the tax collectors John said, *Collect no more than you are authorized to do* (v.13). To the soldiers John said, "Be content." *And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages"* (v.14b).

Do you think the people, the soldiers, the tax collectors could change like that? Do you and I? Did we suddenly decide to change one day and "presto" everything was different? These changes John mentioned are only possible after God has changed our very natures through the miracle of salvation, the miracle of regeneration. These are the fruits of righteousness. This kind of change will be taking place in our lives AFTER we are changed and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

The people wondered if John was the Christ (vv.15-18). This is an indication that, in general, people were expecting Christ. *As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts*

*concerning John, whether he might be the Christ* (v.15). John pointed out that he was not Christ and explained the difference. He explained that the Greater One will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. *John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire"* (v.16). Again baptism is identification. When we are saved by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are fully identified with Him. Our water baptism is only a public demonstration of the reality that we are reborn through the Holy Spirit's work.

Furthermore, John taught that the Greater One separates the wheat from the junk. *His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire* (v.17). Only Jesus makes the eternal difference between good and bad, valuable and useless. In the end, Christ who saves us by His blood gathers us to Himself. All who are not saved through faith in Christ are considered chaff, junk that needs to be thrown out, yeah, cast into burning for eternity.

The story about the Greater One is Good News. *So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people* (v.18). John preached to people who lived in a very corrupt world where corruption and unrighteousness were expected and acceptable. That is our world. But when people who live corrupt lives in our corrupt world are confronted with the message of repentance and forgiveness, God uses that message to offer His grace. Some people are overwhelmed by God's grace and, confessing their sins, are born again. When salvation comes, change comes. The saved person abandons all hope in religion and embraces salvation through faith in Christ's finished work. People like that cling to the Good News about Jesus. People like that live changed lives, which lives stand in stark contrast to the corruption they once lived and which is evident all around them.