

Preparation Through Repentance

December 5, 2021 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Luke 3:1-6

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 wilderness. 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

‘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 people will see God’s salvation.”

Luke wanted the readers of his gospel to know that the preaching of John the Baptist was a matter of history. This was before the calendar we use today was established, so they used historical people as reference so that the reader could discern the time in which an event took place. The way Luke did this was by naming off some people who were in leadership roles at the time of John. One of the remarkable things, though, is that Luke used as reference people who were all contemptible leaders as far as someone who was trying to live a righteous life was concerned.

Tiberius Caesar. By making a reference to Tiberius Caesar, Luke was reminding his Jewish readers that they were ruled over by a foreign power, the Roman Empire. Their Jewish ancestors had left slavery in the land of Egypt. Now, the Jewish people were under a kind of slavery in their own land by the Roman Empire. By making a reference to Tiberius Caesar, the Jewish nation was reminded that it was oppressed and subservient to a people who could be very brutal at times, including using one of the most barbaric forms of torture ever conceived by humankind, called crucifixion. Roman

emperors liked to deify themselves. And although Tiberius discouraged worship of himself as a god, he did deify his father Augustus. Thus, Tiberius liked to have people refer to him as “the son of god,”¹ a title that particularly rankled those who followed Christ as the Son of God.”

Pontius Pilate. The Gospels and extrabiblical sources portray Pilate as proud, arrogant, and cynical (cf. John 18:38), and also weak and vacillating. As governor, Pilate displayed insensitivity and brutality (cf. Luke 13:1). Reversing the policy of the earlier governors, Pilate marched his troops into Jerusalem carrying standards bearing images that the Jews viewed as idolatrous. Outraged, many protested heatedly against what they saw as a sacrilege. Pilate ignored their protests and ordered them, on pain of death, to stop bothering him. But they called his bluff and dared him to carry out his threat. Unwilling to massacre so many people, Pilate removed the offending standards. The story reveals his poor judgment, stubbornness, arrogance, and vacillating weakness. Pilate also enraged the Jews when he took money from the temple treasury to build an aqueduct to bring water to Jerusalem. In the ensuing riots, his soldiers beat and slaughtered many of the protesters.²

Herod, tetrarch of Galilee and Philip, tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis. These two were members of the notorious Herod family, sons of Herod the Great. When Herod died in 4 B.C., his domain was divided among three of his sons, Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip. Archelaus proved to be such an inept and brutal ruler that he was deposed in A.D. 6 and his territory (Judea, Samaria, and Idumea) was placed under the rule of Roman governors (as noted above, Pilate was the fifth of those governors). The Herod in view here is Antipas, who ruled Galilee from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39. He is the Herod referred to in the Gospels’ accounts of Jesus’ ministry. It was Antipas who imprisoned (Luke 3:20) and executed (Luke 9:9) John the Baptist, and played a role in the unjust trial of Jesus (Luke 23:7–12).

Antipas’s brother Philip ruled the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis (northeast of Galilee) from 4 B.C. to A.D. 34. Philip has been considered the best of the Herodian rulers.³

Lysanias, tetrarch of Abilene. Not much is known about Lysanias. There were at least two rulers named Lysanias in the days of John the Baptist.

Annas and Caiaphas. Although no longer officially the high priest, Annas was nonetheless the most powerful figure in the Jewish religious establishment. He had been the high priest ... when he was removed from office by... Pilate’s predecessor as governor. ... Many Jews, resentful of the Romans’ meddling in their religious affairs, still considered [Annas] to be the true high priest (especially since according to the Mosaic

¹ The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, 5:593.

² MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2009). Luke 1–5 (p. 202). Chicago: Moody Publishers.

³ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2009). Luke 1–5 (p. 202). Chicago: Moody Publishers.

law high priests served for life; cf. Num. 35:25). ...Since high priests were appointed and deposed at the whim of the Romans, Caiaphas's unusually long tenure testifies to his skill as a politician. His ruthless determination to preserve his own status and power can be seen in his proposal that Jesus be executed (John 11:49–50)...

Annas was proud, ambitious, and notoriously greedy. A major source of his income came from the temple. He received a share of the proceeds from the sale of sacrificial animals; only those for sale at the temple (for exorbitant prices) would be approved as an offering. Annas also got a cut of the fees the money changers charged to exchange foreign currency (only Jewish money could be used to pay the temple tax; cf. John 2:14). So notorious was his greed that the outer courts of the temple, where the business was conducted, became known as the Bazaar of Annas ...Annas and Caiaphas especially hated Jesus because He twice disrupted their temple business operations (John 2:13–16; Matt. 21:12–13).

These two wretched individuals, as greedy and corrupt as the pagans they despised, exercised tremendous control over the people of Israel. Their rule was especially odious, since they corrupted their God-ordained authority (cf. Matt. 23:1–3). The epitome of their wickedness came during the mock trial of Jesus, in which they played the leading roles.⁴

It was into this corrupt environment – politically, economically, religiously – into which John the Baptist came to preach his message of repentance. People had come to believe that their living conditions were about as bad as they could get, and they were crying out for someone to save them from their depraved world. Along comes John the Baptist, a fiery preacher with an urgent message.

John the Baptist preached “***a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.***” Now, a non-Jewish person might expect to hear a sermon like that, for there were Gentiles, often referred to as God-fearers, who would come to worship at the Temple of Jerusalem. But Jews themselves were not typically told they needed to repent. They believed they were already accepted into the kingdom just by having Jewish ancestry. For John to claim that they too needed to repent – that is, to turn away from their sin and turn toward God – was a surprising development. Yet John did not hesitate to let them know that the first step on the road to salvation was that they needed to repent. It would be easy enough to point fingers of blame at the Roman government or at their religious leaders or at someone else. But John let them know that the vehicle for change, for redemption, for forgiveness began by taking responsibility for their condition in life for themselves. They could blame no one else for their problems than themselves. They needed to turn away from their bad behavior and turn toward God. Only through repentance would they prepare the way for forgiveness.

⁴ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2009). Luke 1–5 (pp. 203–204). Chicago: Moody Publishers.

When a king was ready to pay a visit to a city, the way had to be prepared for him. Crooked paths had to be made straight. Rough places had to be made smooth. Pits had to be filled in. Hills had to be leveled off. It was a lot of work, a lot of preparation. Likewise, the people of Israel were expecting a king, a Messiah. They would have to prepare the way of the Lord by repenting of their ways, making whatever changes were necessary in their lives to prepare for the Lord's coming. They needed to ask: What in our life is crooked and needs to be made straight? What rough parts in our life that we have allowed to corrupt us will we need to smooth out? What pits or vacancies in our life would have to be filled with renewed devotion to God? What obstacles have we allowed to form a hill in our life that will need to be gotten rid of to make way for our King?

These are the kinds of questions we would do well to ask ourselves as we prepare for the coming of our King. It would be easy enough for us to blame others for the mess this world is in. We could point fingers at the Pilates, Caiaphas', and Annas' of our day – whoever we might want to blame for our political, economic, and spiritual woes – but what about you? What about your life and my life that has contributed to the depravity of this world? How much of our sin is responsible for Jesus' having to go to the cross? Before we point fingers of blame at someone else, we need to take a good hard look at our sinful selves and our need to repent.

We are in the season of Advent where we simultaneously are preparing for the commemoration of the coming of our Lord for the first time and are in preparation for our Lord's second coming as well. We need to prepare for the coming of our Lord through repentance, acknowledging that we are sinners and are unworthy of God's presence. Yet we also acknowledge the grace of God who forgives us and invites us to the Lord's Table, because our Lord loves us while we are yet sinners. All people are welcome to come to His table, so that "***all people will see God's salvation.***" Not all people will prepare the way. Not all people will accept Christ's offer of salvation, yet it is still open to all. May we have the wisdom to prepare for the coming of the Lord through repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Amen.