

Luke 3:1-6

When Barack Obama comes to town, no one is surprised. No one is surprised because the Secret Service doesn't like surprises. There is an extensive procedure and protocol which every city goes through before the President comes rolling into the area. His schedule is meticulously set; the guest list for every event is often limited and hand-picked; his path is often cleared of any traffic or the need to stop for traffic lights. Plus the new media is all over the topic and the various implications of this visit to the vision/goals of our President. But in the ancient world, things weren't so high-tech. Leaders didn't have CNN to announce their coming. Kings relied on their trusty messengers to go before them and prepare the way. Such messenger would make sure the roads were safe for travel and that the people knew who was coming. Today in the gospel of Luke, we see John the Baptist enter the public eye as God's messenger. He was the herald who proclaimed Jesus' coming, and his message still has force in our lives: **"Prepare the Way for Jesus!" 1. John comes in the desert for all to see, 2. John touches the hearts of you and me.**

1. He comes in the desert for all to see.

Like no other writer in the New Testament, Luke connects us to history. He writes, "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 Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert." Luke loves history and whether you and I love it or not, we need to wrestle with the "WHY" question. Why does Luke include these details and why do they matter to you and me?

Remember first off, that John the Baptist was the "son of Zechariah". With this little piece of info, Luke is reminding you and me of all the activity surrounding John's birth some thirty years earlier. Zechariah had been serving in the temple of God, when the angel Gabriel appeared to him. Gabriel told the aged Zechariah, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son... and he will be great in the sight of the Lord" (Luke 1:13,15). But Zechariah had his doubts, especially when he considered how old his wife Elizabeth was. So, Gabriel took away Zechariah's ability to speak until the baby was born. Just as God had predicted, John entered the world and everyone was talking about it. Old Elizabeth had given birth to a son and everyone was in awe for the Lord's hand was with this child. God keeps his promises. After 400 years of silence from our God, 400 years since Malachi has last prophesied, now the messenger is here. **John comes for all to see.**

So, John enters his public service to God in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. It was a time of extremes. The economic prosperity God's people were enjoying was phenomenal. The Roman Empire had brought peace and wealth through military conquests and the Romans were ruling through these tetrarchs. But the other extreme was the spiritual bankruptcy of the times. There were two high priests, Annas and Caiaphas! Social intrigue and bitter in-fighting had left the Jews just like the rest of the world. They sought power and prestige rather than faithfulness to the Father. They had lost focus. The time was right for heartfelt examination among God's people—and John came to do it!

Might we be seeing the same extremes today? Economic prosperity unparalleled in the history of mankind—that's what we enjoy as Americans. Yes, there's talk of recession and economic downturn, but we are still richer than 94 percent of the world's population. Yet, how would you describe the spiritual condition of our world and our homes? Is faithfulness to the Father *the* priority? For most Americans, a relationship with Jesus doesn't matter. Worldly

pursuits, money-money-money, and success—these are what drive our society. If that’s the focus of everything around us, have worldly pursuits filled our hearts? John’s mission was to prepare the way for the Savior in a materialistic culture, when God’s people were losing focus. Think John the Baptist might have something to say to you and me today?

Now finally, Luke gives us one last piece of the puzzle: **John comes in the desert for all to see!** But why the desert? Why not downtown Jerusalem? Or central-city Jericho? Certainly there’d be more people to hear his message. God, though, sets the stage for John’s preparation of hearts. There will be “a voice of one calling in the desert” and John is that voice. He’s in the desert as one separated from society and therefore, he’s able to level his scathing critique of hearts. His mission in the desert is a mission of preparation for all people—you and me included. By meeting us in the bare wilderness, where no one else would live, where it’s just you and your God, he asks each one of us, “Are you ready for the Savior to come?”

2. He touches the hearts of you and me.

But how do we get ready? How do we prepare the way for the Lord? How did John prepare the way for the Lord? Luke tells us, “He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John prepared the way for the Lord by preaching repentance. God had also given John the charge to wash people. By a miracle of God’s Spirit, the word of God came to him. John was commanded to give the people a washing, a baptism, which called for repentance first. It was a repentance-baptism operation. But what is repentance? What does it mean to repent? John said it; Jesus said it: “Repent for the Kingdom of God is near!” But what does repentance mean for us?

I don’t know how many in our world remembered, but November 9th of this year was the 20th anniversary of the toppling of the Berlin wall. In 1961 the Communist German government built a wall that stood as a barrier to freedom, and a symbol of the greater divide that existed between the United States’ democracy and the USSR’s communism. Families were caught on different sides of the wall. Tyranny kept loved ones apart. Everyone recognized the wall was a barrier to unity and peace. It needed to come down—and it came down in glorious fashion on November 9th, 1989.

The barriers in your life and mine are the things Isaiah describes. Mountains of pride tell me, “I’m okay! He’s got all the problems! I don’t need to turn away from any sins. I’m a good person, a good Christian!” We might think we’re OK, but there’s a mountain barrier standing between us and Jesus. Valleys of sin show just how low we can go in our sinful thoughts. I’m talking about those thoughts you can’t believe you had—you don’t want to believe you had. Sinful thoughts directed toward your next door neighbor, your co-worker, your friend. Or what about the crooked roads in our hearts—reminding us that sometimes we are living lies? Could there be lies we live with and lies we have become comfortable with? Maybe they are things we’ve become so comfortable with, we don’t even see them as lies anymore! These are barriers to Christ, blocking his path to us—standing like the Berlin Wall, because we’ve convinced ourselves we don’t need his forgiveness for this or that. Repentance means we get rid of these barriers to Jesus. Repentance means we turn away from the sins in our hearts. Repentance means we see that even at our best moments we have sins in our hearts! We still have sins because we have sinful natures and God says, “Repent!”

You might be saying to yourself, “Well, pastor, the situation seems pretty hopeless. If even in our best works we still sin, what hope do we have?” If that’s what you’re thinking right now, then you’re starting to understand what John preaches about repentance. Repentance means we despair of ourselves. We turn away from our sins and realize our own inability to save

ourselves. That's where the second part of repentance becomes oh so sweet. The second part of repentance is that we turn to our Savior! We trust the Christ who came and died for us. "All mankind will see God's salvation"—this is what God our Father wants. He wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. And do you know what the truth is? The truth is that God works repentance in us. First through his law, leading us to see our sins. But then through his Gospel, leading us to trust our Savior Christ Jesus!

Let me prove that God is the one doing the work, to lead you and me in repentance. Look at what Isaiah the prophet said, "Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth." Who do you suppose is doing the 'filling in' and the 'making low', the 'straightening' and the 'smoothing'? Is it you and me who are accomplishing these monumental feats of strength? Do we make ourselves feel really bad about our sins and therefore, God must forgive me? No! With human beings it's impossible to repent of sin, but with God all things are possible. God is the One who does the work in us, because he's the One who did the work of rescue for us. He's at work in us to remind us of the forgiveness of our sins. He takes those mountains of pride and he hurls them into the depths of the sea, never to be seen again. He shatters the crooked roads with the truth of sins forgiven and forgotten in Christ Jesus. Don't look to yourself for the strength trust – look to him! He came in Bethlehem to smooth out the patches of sin in our souls. He went through all the work to save us and he promises to continue working on our hearts today. He touches the hearts of you and me because he loves us that much. Prepare your hearts for the LORD by looking to him for strength. He has given his very life for you. Don't hesitate to

It's no surprise to us today: the Secret Service is not going to prepare the way for our Lord Jesus. He doesn't need them to do anything. But thank God for servants of the Word, servants like John the Baptist, who unabashedly prepared the way for our Savior. **Continue to prepare the way for Jesus** in your life. Don't be afraid to examine your life according to his law, because you know that he lives in heaven forever to forgive your sins forever! May the Lord Christ himself continue to use the faithful preaching of his Word to turn our hearts from sin and to see our gracious Savior. AMEN.

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