

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

*“A voice of one calling in the desert,
 ‘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 mankind will see God’s salvation.’ ” Luke 3:1-6*

John Came

This week I stumbled across an internet news article about a cadet at the U.S. Military Academy who resigned just five months before graduation because he believes that the academy favors what he called “fundamentalist Christianity.” The news article, of course, came with a blog. Overwhelmingly, the comments were anti-Christian rants. Many of the attacks accused Christians of being closed minded and stupid and programmed by their parents to be blind to the facts of the world around them. Most of the quotes had so much profanity in them that I would be ashamed to read them out loud in church, but one of the bloggers wrote, “How is it that what I see as absolutely 100% obviously ridiculous ... can be the foundation for belief for another?” That writer goes on to conclude there must be some biological difference between our brains and his or hers. The clash between faith and unbelief lies at the heart of our gospel lesson for today. Luke introduces the ministry of John the Baptist – a ministry that seemed revolutionary in its day – and he shows us what it meant. He does something that may be unique in the Scriptures. In these six verses, God brings together two very different cultures. The contrast between the ancient Semitic world of the Jewish people and the Western world of the Greeks and Romans – the world that is the foundation of modern Western society – is unmistakable. In that contrast, Luke shows us the purpose and the plans of God. He tells us,

I. John came because God made a promise.

II. John came because God keeps his promises.

I.

We want to begin our study of this encounter between east and west with the second half of what Luke wrote for us today. Verses four, five and six contain a prophecy from the book of Isaiah. This prophecy is about as Hebrew as anything could be. It was already ancient by the time that Luke quoted it – more than seven hundred years old. And it was poetry. It pictures an amazing highway construction project in which mountains are leveled and rough places smoothed out. In true Hebrew poetic fashion it repeats ideas like, “prepare the way for the Lord/make straight paths for him.” Or it balances opposite ideas, as in “every valley shall be filled in/every mountain and hill made low.”

More than seven hundred years before these things came true, God told his people what was going to happen. Because he was writing about the future, he wrote in this poetic manner. God could’ve done things differently. He could’ve simply said when and where John the Baptist would be born. He could’ve told the name of his parents and the circumstances of his birth in plain Hebrew centuries before it all happened. But God wanted every generation of Jews to watch and wait for John and for Jesus, just like he wants us to watch and wait for Jesus to come again. So God pictured what Jesus and John would do so that when the promise finally came true, God’s people would have this “aha!” moment and would realize, “This is what God meant!” And of course, God helped them see the fulfillment when it finally came. John the Baptist himself pointed back to this very prophecy and said, “This is about me!”

Through Isaiah, God made a promise to his people. He promised a voice calling out in the desert. Obviously, a voice is connected to a person. God promised a preacher. But why in the desert? In the prophecy itself, it fits, because the superhighway would be built in the desert. But the fact that the voice would cry out in the desert must have been striking to the generations of Jewish people who thought about these words. After all, if you want your voice to be heard, you need to go someplace where there are people. Deserts are pretty empty. But God promised a voice in the desert and he brought the whole city of Jerusalem out to hear the fulfillment.

What did that voice cry out? **“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.”** This highway was not to connect Jerusalem and Babylon. It was not for increasing trade or business or travel opportunities. This highway had one purpose: for the Lord to come. So what kind of highway would they build? Obviously, not a physical highway in the desert. This was a picture of the human heart. This was a call to prepare to see the Savior. Ever since the fall into sin, God had been promising that a Savior would come. Now, God called them to prepare their hearts to meet him.

What kind of preparation did they need to do for the Messiah? They were to fill in the valleys and cut down the mountains for this highway. If you’ve ever driven through the mountains, one side of the highway will often be a wall of rock that has been cut away. The road is level because the debris was put under it. What does this represent? Repentance and faith. The mountains are pride and sin. Think back to the Garden of Eden. What did the devil say? “You will be like God.” That worked. And it still works. Those people who rage at us are filled with pride. They don’t want to admit that God is greater than their puny intellects. But even we have the same problem. Every time we sin, it’s because we decide to put what we think or what we want or what we feel ahead of what God says. We act on our feeling and then we bend over backwards to come up with an excuse. We run other people down and hurt their reputations, and then we say, “Well it’s all true.” We lie and we have some good excuse. We fill up on the unchristian attitudes of the world we live in and we silence our conscience by saying, “That’s just life today. It’s no big deal.” All that pride and sin has to come down. We have to admit that we are guilty and that we deserve God’s punishment in hell.

But that’s not the end. We also have to fill in the valleys. What are the valleys? Despair. Defeat. Hopelessness. Once we see just how guilty we really are, we wallow in our guilt. We hammer away at ourselves and call ourselves the worst Christians ever. We may even think that terrible sinners like us can’t make it to heaven. That valley needs to be filled in with Christ. He alone was perfect. He was the Son of God. But he made himself a man so that one perfect human could live in our place and be perfect in his heart and his mind, in his words and in his actions. Jesus was perfect for us. Then he died and paid for all that pride and sin, all that gossiping and selfishness and self-justification. And then he rose and wiped it all away. We fill in the valleys of despair when we trust in him.

That is the road that Jesus travels into our hearts. Isaiah says, **“And all mankind will see God’s salvation.”** That’s really the point. John came to announce that Christ was about to arrive. John came to announce that God’s message would no longer be only a Jewish message and his church would no longer be only a Jewish church. God gave the promise in very Jewish terms, but all mankind will see his salvation. That was always God’s plan. **John came because God made a promise.**

II.

God communicated all that using the Hebrew scriptures in a way that resonated with Hebrew thought. But God isn’t Jewish. In the first three verses of this reading, God used Luke, Jew to be sure, but also an educated, Greek speaking doctor to write to communicate Christ to a Western audience. So our reading for today begins with a date, the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. That would put us about in the year 28 or 29. But Luke says more. He tells us that **“Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene.”** Now, I’m guessing that Traconitis and Iturea are not household names for us. Abilene is, but when you hear that name, you probably think of Texas, not Syria, which is where this Abilene is located. Galilee and Judea are the only places we really know here. And likewise, Pontius Pilate and Herod are the only people in this verse that we’ve heard much about. The next verse goes on to mention the Jewish high priests, Annas and Caiaphas, whom we do hear about at the end of Jesus’ life.

What's the point of all these strange names and places? This is how you dated things in the ancient world. No one back then looked at their calendar and saw 2012 – or even 28 – written at the top of it. They reckoned their dates from the beginnings of reigns of kings or from the founding of their city or country. To a 1st century reader, this was like opening up a newspaper or magazine and seeing the date at the top. It communicated a very important truth, then and now: this is real. It's history, not mythology. God is telling us exactly when this took place. That's a very western, even modern concern.

What happened at that real, historical moment? **“The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the desert.”** God intervened in our world. Zechariah and Elizabeth were very old when John was born. So old, in fact, that his miracle birth set the stage for Jesus' miracle birth. Probably, they were dead by this time and John was living in the desert. And God came and spoke to him. God made John the last Old Testament prophet. In the Old Testament, God gave messages to the prophets to speak to his people. Always, the messages were designed to call them back to him. Always they were designed to steer his people to see the Savior when he came. John is the last prophet to have the job of preparing God's people to recognize the Messiah. His mission was to say, “He's almost here!”

So God sent him to preach a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. What is a baptism of repentance? It's a baptism that we receive because we are repentant. Why does anyone get baptized? Sadly, in our time, many people have come to look at baptism as nothing more than a traditional thing to do. But baptism is much more than a tradition. It's a remedy for sin. The only reason that I needed to be baptized is that I was born a sinner. That's the reason why my wife and I brought our children to be baptized. We are all sinners. We're born that way. The sin that we inherited from our parents already made us guilty. Sadly, every day of my life, I've added to that load of sin. One day, I will face the Lord. On that day, God will dispense justice to the world. The wages of sin is death – physical death in this life and eternal death in hell forever. But God designed baptism to rescue us from his justice. In baptism, God applies the life and death and resurrection of Jesus to us. We die and we rise with him. Because we did die and rise with him, God counts our sentence as served. God closes the books on our sin and invites us to live with him in heaven.

God does a real miracle in baptism. First he forgives us, once and forever. Then he reaches into our hearts and gives and strengthens faith. John preached forgiveness through baptism at the very beginning of the New Testament and the very end of the Old. Christ confirmed it later and gave it to the whole church. And it's striking that when east and west meet in these verses, when prophecy and fulfillment come together, God puts the waters of baptism next to the highway into our hearts. Sin drives us to the font. But in the waters of baptism, God washes the mountains of pride and sin away. God fills in the valleys of despair and guilt that torment us. God sets us free and Jesus rides that superhighway into our hearts.

John's ministry was the fulfillment of the words Isaiah spoke. Through him, God began the process of making all mankind see his salvation. But this story really isn't about John. It's about Jesus. The only reason God promised to send John was to prepare the way for Christ. When John came, Jesus was right behind him. When Jesus came, God fulfilled all those Old Testament promises of a Savior. And he made more promises – promises of life, promises of love and care, promises that still center is that ancient promise that all mankind will see God's salvation. **John came because God keeps his promises.**

We rest in those promises today. No matter how many people mock us, no matter how much unbelievers hate our message, no matter how disturbing we find the filth and the violence of those blogs to be, God made a promise that all mankind will see his salvation. They will see it in the message God gave us. They will see it when the world ends and our Savior returns. By God's grace, we see it now. We see every promise that he keeps as a token that not one promise will ever fail. John came. Christ came. He will come again. Amen.