

December 5, 2021
First Baptist Church of Rochester
Rev. Benjamin Smith, preaching
Luke 3:1-6

Just like the passage I preached on a few weeks ago, this isn't one I turn to very often. But it's a classic! It tells the story of how one person, John, received news from God that the Lord would soon be among them and that God would be up to great and miraculous things. When I saw that this text was going to be our reading for today, I didn't exactly jump up and down, though, because, as special as it is, it doesn't tell us a lot about John or this news he's received. As I read it in preparation, I didn't know whether I'd have enough material to preach on. It's a pretty short story, after all— just a few paragraphs.

But then I noticed how the story begins. The story of God's first steps in the world starts "in Tiberius' fifteenth year," a mention that I first found boring and skippable, but which, after a little bit of reading, can actually tell us a lot. Luke, who has just announced the birth of John and Jesus in chapters one and two, anchors his story in history in Chapter 3, or, in other words, tells us that the coming of the Lord has big implications— big implications not just for people all across Judea, but governments both big and small, from greater Judea to little Galilee. This mention comes just two chapters after Mary thanked "God [her] Savior" for "bringing down" the oppressive elite from their "thrones" and taking the side of lowly women like her. Now, two chapters later, Luke exposes these elites by name: Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, and Lysanias.

This is getting pretty intense.

For me, Mary's use of the word "throne" clearly implies that she is talking about leaders of the state and not a symbolic elite. Luke's clear reference to these leaders by name in our story this morning confirms my assumption.

Maybe we *do* have enough to work with.

Let's look at Tiberius for a second, the first person Luke names. Tiberius became Caesar after the death of Augustus (Octavian) in the year 14. Eight years later, his son died and the leader exiled himself, first to Campania and then to the Isle of Capri, which meant that managing the government fell to somebody called Sejanus, who used his power to purge his enemies from their positions in the government, possibly being responsible for killing Tiberius' son. While this turmoil was happening, Tiberius' health started to decline, which is understandable and led to his death in the year 37. "The fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius" (the period our story opens during) would've happened eight or nine years ago during Sejanus' period of terror in which Tiberius was powerless, checked out, and probably really depressed.

It's probably no coincidence then that our story unfolds during all this. In fact, this era of turmoil seems so integral to Luke's story that he not only opens the story of Jesus with this information, but does so to remind us that this dysfunctional way is typical of earthly empires. Now God has stepped in to show us a *new* way, "the way of the Lord," as John the Baptist was calling it.

Now we're talking. We've got a much more interesting story at our hands now. Let's keep going. In verse 2 Luke tells us that a word from God "came to be upon John." This word came to him during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, but it didn't come to *them*. It came to John,

the son of Zechariah, mister ordinary, not in a temple or high place, but in the wilderness. The middle of nowhere to a total nobody.

The wilderness would've been an important place to any Jew hearing this story. The wilderness was where God led the Hebrews out of slavery, a place of promise and future, a place of freedom from oppression and the formation of an identity. It represented the first steps of a people, the suspension of reality, and the experience of God's promises. It was a place between places where God liked to do wild things. Luke tells us that John preached this message in the region around the Jordan, a river which, if you remember, served as the boundary into the Promised Land, the river Joshua crossed with the Hebrew people.

The message that John preached in this region was a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." I wasn't really sure what to make of his talk about baptism, especially with my Christian understanding of this practice. I had a hard time seeing where baptism fit into Jewish life, especially without having opened my books from seminary in a while. So I opened them back up and remembered that ritual cleansings, like our baptisms today, were common practices in Judaism and other Mediterranean religions. The idea was that anything that might defile the temple needed to be washed off a person before he could enter. This was partly why wealthy Jews had private baths.

For us, "repentance" usually involves regret or remorse and the action of expressing this feeling. In Greek, though, the word used for repentance here has less to do with a person's emotions and really means "to turn away." The word is *metanoia*, *meta-* meaning "the mind" and *-noia* meaning "after, with, or beyond." So by preaching about repentance, John the Baptist wasn't so much preaching that people should feel bad about themselves and repent, but, instead, that there was a new way of doing things now and that God was calling people to turn away from the old one, the way of Tiberius, Pilate, and Antipas. To look forward, not backward.

Just like Luke anchors his story in history, John anchors his preaching in scripture. His call to "make his paths straight" is actually taken from Isaiah, a prophet he would've heard plenty about as a Jew, who called people to make the paths of God straight long ago, and whom now John is quoting to imply that the messiah Isaiah anticipated is Jesus himself, the cousin of a mountain man, the son of young Mary, who was soon to be born in Bethlehem, which, as far as everyone else was concerned, was in the middle of nowhere, or, in other words, not Jerusalem.

But the most amazing thing John says is that God's mission isn't just for the Jews, but, rather, that "*all* flesh will see the glory of God." Sure, the mission of God may have *started* with the Hebrew people, but its scope will span every mountain and hill to every last person.

This is the message of John the Baptist, our mountain man.

I find it pretty cool that this message, this powerful word, is delivered to us every year by a locust-eating wild man. To me, this fact shows us that God's story not only begins with folks like me and you, but that you and I, just like John the Baptist, have a *part* in telling God's story. Everything we do is part of how we choose to tell the story of God in the world— and how others will hear it. That isn't to scare you into acting perfectly from now on, or to guilt you for how you might've failed to do this in the past, but to suggest that maybe God's story is so compelling that it takes a whole village to tell it. For John, the story of God was a simple one— we've been doing things wrong. The way of the government and religious elite is the *old* way, the *wrong*

way. The way of living so separated from one another no longer cuts it. There's a new way now. The way of the Lord. Come take it with us. We will go great places together.

As people, we will always be standing at the crossroads of an old way and a new way. For us right now across the world, COVID has forced us to realize that we're standing at a crossroads like this one right now. I used to freak out over people's talk about a "new normal" following the pandemic, but John the Baptist reminds us that this might not be such a bad thing. Maybe the old way of doing things wasn't working. Maybe the way of the Lord is still opening up before us. And maybe we have a chance right now to take this path together.

Which makes me think... I for one have always had a complicated relationship to the idea of repentance. In our style of being Baptist, we don't really place a heavy emphasis on it, but the process of turning away from the old way and towards the new one is, if you ask John, not only part of Christian life, but the *core* action behind following Jesus. Maybe instead of guilt-ing ourselves for what we have and haven't done, repentance is an invitation, a chance, an act of grace—the reminder that, even when we have burned our bridges or fail to act differently, there is still another way forward. Maybe repentance isn't so much about turning inward as it is moving forward.

I like the idea that *this* may've been what John the Baptist was preaching about. And I like the possibility that the first words of the story of Jesus according to Luke were kind and grace-filled. Instead of "turn away from your evil ways" I hear Luke saying: "Come, take this path with me. It is so much better than the old path. These first steps are called the way of the Lord. Come take it with me."

As we look back on the pandemic, it's becoming clearer to most of us that the old way wasn't working. A lot of us are rethinking what it means to go to work and have enjoyed more time with family these last couple years. A lot of us have suffered devastating loss and pain, sickness and sadness, and despair. Some of us have been alright. Some of us haven't. But while these things have been happening, a new way has started to open. Our old ways of living and working just weren't cutting it. Zoom calls have brought us together in ways we didn't anticipate. Folks are joining us virtually who haven't before. We all slowed down, stopped working our heads off, and were able to reflect in our homes with our families. Workers went home, stores shut down, and the people slept. The whole world stopped, which as you and I know, is what has to happen before things can move forward. Motion isn't motion without inertia.

Now the wheels of the world have begun to turn again. Slowly and tentatively, but noticeably. As we ride along together, I can't help but hope that maybe, just maybe, between where we are now and where we are headed, in this place between places, we might do a little healing. Amen.