

Luke 3:1-6

## IN THE WILDERNESS

The scripture lesson begins with Luke's list of rulers and religious figures. We read about Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, followed by the high priests, Annas and Caiaphas. In part, Luke is giving us an historical clue as to when John the Baptist came on the public scene: "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius." Since the previous Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar, had died on August 19, 14 A. D., and Tiberius followed him, then fifteen years later would date John the Baptist's appearance some time around 29 A. D. As someone has said, "Luke takes time to describe the context... The word of God does not hover above the ground but sinks an anchor into the earth, claiming that earth as God's own." (David H. Jensen)

This brings us to the second reason why I think Luke included these rulers and religious leaders in his narrative. I believe Luke was suggesting that the time for a new history was about to begin. The established powers were on a collision course with the very power of God. The world ordered by Tiberius and his lesser lords was a corrupt world; and the same could be said about the temple. Thus, God was doing a new thing in order to fashion a new community based on faith, hope, and love. Time was running out for the powerful elite because God's plan was already set in motion.

The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. Have you ever noticed how often the wilderness or the desert (the two words are interchangeable in scripture) is where God is revealed? We tend to think of the wilderness as a place that is barren, isolated, and uninhabited. The wilderness depicts an uninviting place; it's a place we would rather not be for the most part. However, God often appeared to people in the desert. God led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness towards the Promised Land. Jesus went to the desert to pray and to seek God's will. And, the wilderness is where John appeared in order to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Perhaps God comes to people in the wilderness because "out there" humans can make nothing of themselves; it's a place set apart where only God can do anything. In the desert, there are few distractions. There are no marketplaces or town squares, no televisions or telephones, no noisy cars or barking dogs, no sirens or sounds of industry. There is only quiet, and there is God, who wants our undivided attention.

Also, the wilderness is where most of us live anyway. I don't mean that we live in a literal wilderness but we do live in a sinful state that can be barren, void of a life that satisfies and fulfills our deepest yearnings. We live frantic and anxious lives. We are overwhelmed with too many activities, and we do not take the time to slow down, be still, and dwell in the presence of God. We live in the wilderness of angry thoughts and selfish desires, of mean words that we speak and of gossip that we repeat. We exist in a wasteland of either thinking too much of ourselves or we think too little of ourselves. In the desert of our souls, we are held captive to our culture and its impure values, and we neglect to care for others. As we heard in our Bible study a couple of weeks ago, we "do not do the good that we want, but the evil we do not want to do is what we do."

If you have ever felt that way, if you find yourself residing in a wilderness of your own doing, then listen up for Good News is on the way! The word of God came to John in the wilderness, and he went into all the region (even

here, today!) proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John was the messenger, the forerunner sent by God, to proclaim and point the way to Jesus (God in human flesh).

It used to be the custom for oriental monarchs to send couriers ahead of them on their journeys to check out the roads and warn the people to get to work, smoothing out the ruts and patching the potholes - all because the king was on the way. In like manner, John quoted the prophet Isaiah and told them to prepare the way of the Lord. They were to do their part to get ready for the Messiah by repenting of their sins, taking what was crooked in their lives and making it straight, smoothing out the rough edges as best as possible, and embracing the Lord when he stepped onto the stage of human history. Then, they were to trust God for God would do the rest!

Likewise, we are called to do the same. In this season of Advent, as we prepare for Jesus' arrival - remembering the first time in Bethlehem, anticipating the second coming, and welcoming him into our hearts anew - we strive to repent of our sins and step out of the wildernesses we have created for ourselves. Then, we trust God to forgive us and grant us a new lease on life that reconciles us to God, to others, and our own best selves.

Jerome was a scholar, who translated the Bible from Greek to Latin. Near the end of his life, sometime around 420 A. D., Jerome was living near Bethlehem when he had a dream. In the dream, the Christ child appeared to him. He was so overwhelmed by the appearance of the Christ child that he felt he had to give him something. So he got some money and offered it, saying, "Here! This is yours." The Christ child said, "I don't want it." Jerome brought some possessions to him. The Christ child said, "I don't want them either." Jerome said, "If there is anything in the world that I can give you, tell me what it is. Tell me! What do you want? What can I give to you?" He said he dreamed that the Christ child looked at him and said this: "Give me your sin! That's what I came for."

That is precisely what Christ came for - to take away our sin. And, he came to show us the way, the truth, and the life, and to lead us out of our self-induced wildernesses and into newness of life. Jesus doesn't just take away the sins of the world (your sins and my sins); he also gives us grace to grow as his disciples - to do God's will and to live God's way in the world.

There is a medieval legend about a man who was decadent and irresponsible in many ways but who had enough grace in him to want to be good. He went to a costume maker who gave him a costume to wear - complete with a halo wired to his head. As the man walked down the street he was tempted to act and react in his normal, shiftless way - but then he remembered the halo on his head. So he decided to act differently. He gave money to a beggar on the street. He treated his wife well. He refused to cut corners at work. Eventually, he returned the halo costume; but as he was leaving the costume shop he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror - and he saw a permanent halo glowing above his head! It seemed that he had become what he did - that his repentance had made possible God's forgiveness and transformation in his life. By turning around and beginning to behave in a new way, this man found a permanent direction for his life. (As told by Thomas Troeger - Susan R. Andrews, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Dec. 2000, p. 13) When we are in the wilderness, repentance is what we do. Forgiveness and transformation are what God does for us. Let us celebrate our journey away from sin and death and our entry into new life and love for God and others by joining Jesus at his table and feasting with him. We are what we eat. Let us partake of Holy Communion and, in the process, let us become the holy

people that we are called to be - all to the glory of God the Father, the Son,  
and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA December 6, 2009