

The Voice in the Wilderness

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on December 9, 2018

Luke 3:1-6

1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler 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 region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’

This morning as we enter into the second week of Advent, which is a time where we anticipate the second coming of Christ, I would like to begin with two thoughts from last week’s sermon. This first is that many of the mysteries to Christ’s second coming are to be found in studying the dynamics of his first coming. The second point is that each line of Scripture is embedded with rich meaning that can only be unlocked by mastering the entire cannon of Scripture. As an added thought, a strong knowledge in the history and culture of the times is also very helpful.

This is most evident in our reading for today as there is so much contained in these six verses. Starting with the history, in verses one and two, Luke gives us the time frame in which John the Baptist’s ministry takes place as he lists the names of the political and religious rulers that controlled the fate of Israel.

Starting out at the top of the ladder, we are introduced to Tiberius Caesar who was the adopted son of Augustus Caesar. Like many rulers throughout history, Tiberius became plagued with fear that those near to him were trying to overthrow him, so in 26 AD, he moved to the remote island of Capri, and never returned to the city of Rome. Around this time he mandated that Jewish men who were of age must become soldiers of Rome. He also banished all Jews from Rome and threatened to enslave them for life if they did not leave. In the words of the first century Roman historian Tacitus, around this time, Tiberius “...plunged into every wickedness and disgrace, when fear and shame being cast off, he simply indulged his own inclinations.” Needless to say, with this reputation, he was not very popular in the land of Israel.

This is the first ruler that Luke introduces us to. From there he turns his attention to the local rulers of Palestine. However, before we take a moment to consider who they are, it may be helpful to know that after the death of Herod the Great, who was the man to whom the wisemen from the east came, the province of Judea was sub-divided into regions which were ruled by Herod's sons. The first region was given to Herod Archelaus, who was such a poor ruler that he was quickly removed, and replaced by Pontius Pilate, a Roman governor.

As we know, it was Pilate who ordered Christ to be crucified. What we may not know, is that around the time that John was preaching in the wilderness Pilate sent a company of troops into Jerusalem carrying their standards with the images of the gods on them, and told the people to worship and pray to these gods, and pledge their complete allegiance to Caesar. This led to a massive protest outside Pilate's residence by citizens who were ready to die by the sword rather than obey Pilate's decree. Needless to say, Pilate was hated by the people.

The second son of Herod the Great was Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee. Herod Antipas had been raised at the imperial court, and was especially skilled at extracting tax revenues from Galilee. Like his father, he used these revenues not only to support imperial Rome, but also to engage in large scale construction projects. Among these, he built two new cities, Tiberias and Sepphoris. This caused great financial stress on the people of Galilee, not to mention the offense that came from building the city of Tiberias on a graveyard, and filling it with images of Roman gods and Caesars. Herod also earned the scorn of the people when he later imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist. This same Herod Antipas also agreed with Pilate to have Jesus crucified.

The third ruler mentioned in Luke's gospel is Philip. Philip was a just and benevolent ruler in the most northern regions of the land where very few Jews lived. The final ruler listed by Luke is Lysanias of Abilene. Very little is known of Lysanias or the region where he ruled.

Turning to religious leaders who also wielded great power, Luke references Annas and Caiaphas who were the High Priests in Jerusalem. Without giving any more detail, the observant reader will already begin to notice the deep problems that existed in the priesthood at that time as two High Priests are listed, when according to the Law of Moses, there was only supposed to be one, and the term of the High Priest was for life.

The reason for this deviation from the Law of Moses was interference by the Roman officials who sought to install those who would work with them in controlling the Jewish people. As a result, Annas, who had been appointed as High Priest by the Jews had been deposed by the Romans and was eventually replaced by Caiaphas, his son-in-law. This led to the dual priesthood, where Caiaphas bore the official title of High Priest according to Roman records, while Annas, who was the rightful High Priest in the mind of the people, retained all the power associated with the position. That being said, at the end of the day, both were corrupt leaders who constantly used their power to line their own pockets and increase their own authority. To further illustrate this point, archeological explorations from the time indicate that the high priestly families built increasingly elaborate mansions for themselves in Jerusalem. This could have only occurred through close collaboration with the Roman rulers of the region.

All this to say, that when Luke provides us with a time reference for the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry, he also reminds us simply by reciting the names of these rulers that the entire nation of Israel had become corrupt. As a result, the word of God did not come to the corrupt leaders of the day, but instead it was given to John, a true God fearing man who had been set apart from the time of his miraculous conception to call the nation to repentance and declare the good news that the long awaited Christ, the salvation of God, was coming.

In order to prepare himself for this task, Luke tells us that John grew up in the desert. Then, when the time for him to preach arrived he began preaching around the Jordan river. Again, these details are of great significance. For if we recall the story of the nation of Israel, they were purified in the desert. Then when they entered the promised land, they were baptized in the Jordan river as they crossed it from the east to the west. This symbolism would have been plainly understood by the people who came to hear John speak and to be baptized by him.

Furthermore, according to the Old Testament prophecies, which the people knew very well, it had been foretold that the one who would prepare the way for Christ would be a voice in the wilderness who would come in the spirit of Elijah. As you may recall, Elijah was the great prophet of God who was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. And where did Elijah spend his last days on earth? In the wilderness, along the Jordan River. And how did Elijah dress? With clothes made of animal hair and a leather belt. And where was John when he began his ministry and how did he dress? He was in the wilderness around the Jordan river wearing clothes of camel hair and a leather belt. Therefore, to anybody who had eyes to see and ears to hear, John was declaring that he was long awaited voice in the

wilderness who had come in the spirit of Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord.

And how did he prepare the way of the Lord? Again, it is helpful to understand that in those days when a king traveled an emissary would be sent ahead to make sure that the roads that the king would travel on were sufficiently maintained and that the receiving city was in a state of repair worthy to receive a king.

Furthermore, the people would be instructed in proper etiquette and how to prepare themselves to welcome their sovereign lord. Under most circumstances, the people would respond appropriately to the instructions of the emissary and all would be well. However, in the event that the people failed to comply with the direction they had been given and the king arrived and deemed the place unworthy, harsh consequences often resulted.

This is very much the spirit in which John preached his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As he thundered in the wilderness, he confronted the waywardness of the people of Israel and called them to live in a way that would be acceptable to the coming King. Having said all this, it is time to ask, what does this mean for us today? What insights does this give us as we prepare for the second coming of Christ during the Advent season?

Using the rule of mirror prophecies that we talked about last week, we can conclude that the signs of Christ's second coming are a thorough corruption of the political and religious infrastructure. In such a world the law of love has been replaced by fear and the goal of serving the greater good has been replaced with the goal of self preservation. Furthermore, we can conclude that the voice that will bring the word of the Lord to the people will come from outside the established seats of power.

Then, when the word of the Lord does come, we will need to be in the desert to hear it. We will need to be in a place where we are free from the corrupting influences of the worldly power infrastructures. Then, and only then, will we be able to hear the simple words. Repent. The King is coming. Put your house in order. Put your clean clothes on. Be on your best behaviour, lest you displease the king and face his judgement.

This is the word of the Lord that comes from the voice crying out in the wilderness. This is the word of the Lord that comes from the one commissioned to prepare the way of the Lord. So, as we await Christ's coming during this Advent season, may the words of Christ's emissary bring new life to our souls as we anticipate the coming of God's salvation.