

The Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert. ³ He went throughout (the) whole region of 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: “A voice of one crying out in the desert: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”



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Preparing the way: context

Our text is taken from *The Gospel according to Luke*, the first part of a two-volume work (with *Acts of the Apostles*) that continues the biblical history of God’s dealings with humanity found in the Old Testament. The narrative arc shows how God’s promises to Israel have been fulfilled in Jesus and how the salvation promised to Israel and accomplished by Jesus has been extended to the Gentiles.

The principal divisions of Luke’s Gospel are (with our context shown in **bold**):

- Prologue (1:1–4)
- Infancy Narrative (1:5–2:52)
- Preparation for the Public Ministry (3:1–4:13)**
- Ministry in Galilee (4:14–9:50)
- Journey to Jerusalem: travel narrative (9:51–19:27)
- Teaching Ministry in Jerusalem (19:28–21:38)
- Passion Narrative (22:1–23:56)

Resurrection Narrative (24:1–53)

Here in the beginning of the Gospel, we should be especially aware of the “Infancy Narrative” that immediately precedes our Sunday gospel. A more detailed outline of that section might be:

- The Announcement of John’s Birth (1:5–25)
- The Announcement of Jesus’ Birth / Annunciation (1:26–38)
- Mary’s Visit to Elizabeth / Visitation (1:39–56)
- The Birth of John (1:57–80)
- The Birth of Jesus / Nativity (2:1–20)
- The Presentation of Jesus In the Temple (2:21–39)
- The Growth of Jesus, Son of God (2:40–52)

As the outline shows, Luke’s narrative of connecting the promises of the OT to the fulfillment in the NT has very personal lynch pins: the interweaving of John and Jesus as a movement from promise to fulfillment.

Critical to our understanding of the role of this narrative section is the solemn declaration: “... *the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.*” (3:2) This is a narrative flashback to the intertwined accounts of the births of John and Jesus in 1:5–2:52 and presents the first in a series of ways in which the appearances of John and Jesus here are deeply rooted in that earlier material. We left John as a maturing boy in the wilderness, awaiting his public appearance to Israel (1:80). He is still in the wilderness but now at the threshold of his public ministry. He is the “*son of Zechariah*,” a reminder of the awe-inspiring intervention of God leading to the birth of a son to Zechariah and Elizabeth, too old to have children. The mention of Zechariah also ushers back into view the promises to Zechariah from Gabriel and Zechariah’s own celebration of God’s eschatological visitation, both underscoring John’s role in the restoration of Israel (1:14–17, 68–79). It is a quite economic way to lay the groundwork for his depiction of the adult John: he is the one foretold, the divine gift whose birth has already brought honor to his disgraced mother, and the prophet.

In the background of our Gospel, lies the identities of John and Jesus already presented in earlier chapters. John was to be “prophet of the Most High” (1:76), a role he now fulfills; and Jesus was to be designated “Son of God” (1:35)—an identity affirmed by God (3:21–22), confirmed by Jesus’ heritage (3:38), allowed but perversely interpreted by the devil (4:3, 9), and embraced as a mission by Jesus (4:1–13).

As Joel Green (159–160) points out, there are other themes, first raised in the earlier chapter that appear in our account include:

- the wilderness (1:80; 3:2, 4);
- the on-going reference to Isaiah 40 which proclaims God’s universal salvation (1:17, 19, 76; 3:4–6, 18);
- The universality of God’s desire that all be saved (1:55, 73; 2:1–2, 10, 14, 31–32; 3:1, 6);
- the role of John as one who prepares the way (1:14–17, 76–77; 3:4–6);
- the activity of the Holy Spirit (1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25–27; 3:16, 22, 4:1); and
- repentance and forgiveness of sins (1:16–17, 76–77; 3:3, 8–14)

Preparing the way: history

¹ *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis,*

and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.

The chronological data of these verses reflects the conventions of Greco-Roman historiography as well as a pattern found in some Jewish prophetic books (Jer 1:1-3; Ezek 1:1-3; Hos 1:1; Isa 1:1). Luke seeks to place his “orderly account” (Lk 1:1) within the context of “world” history. In addition, this writing, addressed to “Most Excellent Theophilus” (Lk 1:3), places the events within the context of the rulers and times (and some historiographic forms) that Theophilus would know. It is likely that he was some type of Roman official.

Even though six different people are named, that doesn’t allow us to pinpoint the exact date that John began his ministry. First of all, our standard time reckoning of “year of the Lord” (A.D.) did not begin until 533 AD. Our year of 365+ days and 12 months was not standard in the first century. There were at least four different calendars back then. Each reckoned the years differently. We can’t be sure how long “15 years” would have been.

Secondly, we are not sure when Tiberius began his reign or when Luke started counting the years. There were two or three years when Tiberius was co-regency with Augustus starting in 11 or 12 AD. Augustus died in 14 AD. Did the counting start in 11 or 12 or 14? Our best guess is that Luke refers to a time around 28 AD.

The date ranges of the other rulers (from Culpepper, *Luke New Interpreter’s Bible*):

- Pontius Pilate 26-36 AD
- Herod Antipas 4 BC-39 AD
- Philip 4 BC-34 AD
- Lysanias ruler of Abilene is unknown
- Annas was high priest from 6-15 AD
- Caiaphas was high priest from 18-36 AD [p. 40]

Note that Luke includes both civil and religious leaders in his list. There is also a sense of narrowing the focus: starting with the ruler of the Roman Empire -- nearly the whole world -- and ending up at the temple in Jerusalem -- where the high priests did their work.

What is the significance of this information? First of all, they indicate that the historical context was important to Luke. Secondly, I think that Luke tries to show to Theophilus (and all Roman rulers) that Jesus and the Christians were not subversive to Rome. The charges that Jesus was putting himself up against Caesar were created by Jesus’ enemies (see Lk 23:2; compare to 20:21-25). Thirdly, Luke seeks to speak in a form (language) that Theophilus (Luke’s patron) will understand. He places his Gospel in the form and in the historical context that will make sense to his audience.

...the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert

Luke’s phrase in 3:2, “*the word of God came*,” reminds us of Luke’s core and central focus on God. The phrase clearly identifies the source of divine inspiration behind John’s work but also puts us on notice that Luke’s emphasis on God as the story’s primary actor will be carried forward and enlarged. Other evidences of this most intrinsic element show up in this section—for example, the citation of Scripture by the narrator (3:4–6) who thus presents God’s own perspective on John’s ministry, by Jesus (4:4, 8, 12) who is engaged in a process of discerning the way of God, and by the devil (4:10–11) who tries to garner the authoritative voice of God for his own agenda of frustrating God’s purpose; the activity of the Holy Spirit, God’s empowering and guiding agent (3:16, 22; 4:1); the voice of God, heard by Jesus and Luke’s audience, breaking into the narrative in a way that echoes his voice to Israel in the past (3:22); the

genealogy of Jesus (3:23–28), showing Jesus' relation to Israel's past, recalling significant aspects of the story of God's interaction with his people, and testifying to the relation of Jesus to God as his Son; and above all the account of Jesus' test in the wilderness (4:1–13), pitting the aim of God and the design of the devil against each other.

So, we are reminded that, though the narrative spotlight turns first on John then on Jesus, this is not their story. God is the primary actor around whose purpose the narrative develops. In 1:5–2:52 Luke has anticipated the roles of John and Jesus in God's plan. Will they embrace God's aim and serve his design? This is the central question Luke plays out in this Gospel.

He went throughout (the) whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins

The basic meaning of the verb *baptizo* is “to wash,” which is how it is translated in Luke 11:38 (re: ritual washing before meals). The word often also carries, in context, ritual or purifying aspects to the washing. This image is used by Luke in Acts 22:16: “*Get up, and have yourself baptized (baptisai) and your sins washed away (apolouo), calling on his name.*” When one surveys the reports in the Gospels concerning John's baptism (Mark 1:2–6), the origin and significance of which was debated (Matt 21:25; Mark 11:30; Luke 20:4), one notices:

- a) John's action of baptizing with water and his association of baptism with the preaching of repentance (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3);
- b) the actions of the people and of the tax collectors in going out to John (Matt 3:7) “*to be baptized by him*” (Luke 3:7, 12; Matt 3:5f.; Mark 1:5); and
- c) the Baptist's hope that God would respond to repentance with the gift of forgiveness and purification.

Consequently, when the people and the tax collectors were baptized, they acknowledged thereby the critique which touched their lives (Luke 3:1–14) and “*acknowledged the righteous [dikaioo] of God*” (7:29). On the opposite side stood “the Pharisees and the lawyers.” Since they were not baptized by John, they “*rejected the plan of God for themselves*” and brought upon themselves the judgment of God (7:30).

John's baptism put one on God's side – perhaps even in a right relationship with God (a possible meaning for *dikaioo*) – even for the tax collectors. Refusing John's baptism was a rejection of God's purpose, even for those who lived moral, obedient lives. (Note: as important as Luke makes John's baptism, he also makes a clear distinction in his Gospel and in Acts, between John's baptism and the baptism directed by Jesus (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 11:16; 18:25; 19:3-5).

There is a geographical bend to John's baptizing in the region of the Jordan. In an area just north of the Dead Sea is Al-Maghtas, what we Christians know as “Bethany beyond the Jordan” (in modern day Jordan). It is in the wilderness even today. In Deuteronomy 34, Moses reached the precipice of Mt. Nebo overlooking Al-Maghtas and at last could look into Canaan, the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. Moses looked over and beyond the Jordan River into the place of promise that the righteous would inherit. Tradition holds that this was the place where Joshua led the people of Israel into Canaan, crossing the Jordan River. This is the place where Elijah was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot (ref: Luke 1:17). This is the place where John cried out to prepare the way of the Lord and baptized for repentance of sin – and to renew the covenant with God – crossing over into promise as did their ancestors with Joshua – entering into righteousness.

“Repentance” and “repenting” are important words in Luke/Acts. The verb occurs in these books 14 times and the noun 11 times, accounting for ~50% of the usage in the NT. For Luke, repentance is the most important characteristic of Christians. The Greek word group *metanoeo/metanoia* is a combination of a

word for “mind” (*noeo/nous*) and a prefix (*meta*) meaning “after” = “after-thought” or “second thoughts”; or meaning “change” = “change in one’s mind or thinking (upon reflection)”. Key for the NT understanding of the word is OT *šûb* (“turning around,” in the sense of a turning away from present things and returning to the point of departure). The LXX (Septuagint) translates *šûb* as *metanoeo/metanoia* almost without exception.

In John’s baptism for repentance, one can easily connect the baptism with a broader call for the people of Israel to return to the “point of departure” – to return to the very place at which they entered the promised land as covenant people of God. Now they need to “turn away” from all that would hold them from or drive them away from the covenant, the righteousness of God.

As Green notes (171), “John follows biblical precedent in insisting on the correlation of cleansing and moral rectitude. Second, his emphasis on repentance signals his understanding that the status quo of his socio-historical environment has been found wanting. As such, his message constitutes a prophetic appeal for people to turn their backs on previous loyalties and align themselves fundamentally with God’s purpose. Third, by definition the forgiveness of sins has a profound communal dimension; as sin is the means by which persons exclude themselves from community with and the community of God’s people, so forgiveness marks their restoration to the community.”

⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one crying out in the desert: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Luke casts the call of John the Baptist in the form of an Old Testament prophetic call (Luke 3:2) and extends the quotation from Isaiah found in Mark 1:3 (Isaiah 40:3) by the addition of Isaiah 40:4-5 in Luke 3:5-6. In doing so, Luke presents the theme of the universality of salvation, which he has announced earlier in the words of Simeon (2:30-32). Moreover, in describing the expectation of the people (3:15), Luke is characterizing the time of John’s preaching in the same way as he had earlier described the situation of other devout Israelites in the infancy narrative (2:25-26, 37-38). Later, in 3:7-18 Luke presents the preaching of John the Baptist who urges the crowds to reform in view of the coming wrath (Luke 3:7, 9: eschatological preaching), and who offers the crowds certain standards for reforming social conduct (Luke 3:10-14: ethical preaching), and who announces to the crowds the coming of one mightier than he (Luke 3:15-18: messianic preaching).

Luke is keenly interested in the impact his gospel story will have not simply on the world as *kosmos* – the world, that is, conceived most generally – but also on the world as *oikoumene* – the world as it is constituted by the political, economic, and religious powers. John’s preaching of repentance, because it will literally turn people away from the powers that be to the Lord, threatens those invested in the present order.

Perhaps this is why Luke extends the quotation from Isaiah also employed by Mark and Matthew. The advent of the one John anticipates will not only straighten paths, but also fill valleys, bring down mountains, straighten what is crooked, and smooth that which is rough (3:5). In this light, it is perhaps not surprising that further on in the story, John’s preaching will ultimately lead to his beheading by one of those named in Luke 3:1, while Jesus will still later be crucified by another. Those who are threatened by repentance and forgiveness, after all, will not go without a fight.

Luke adds the other verses – those about the transformation of the ups and downs, and sideways-ness of life into straight and smooth and level paths. While this image can lead to the idea of reversal. That is, the rich become poor and the poor become rich. It seems more likely that Luke intends a meaning of equality.

That is, the rich and poor meet in the middle. I think that part of this equality is Luke emphasis that in the God's kingdom (and church) human differences don't matter. There will be rich and poor. There will be slaves and free. There will be males and females. There will be young and old. There will be Jews and Gentiles. All are invited. We might say, there is a level playing field for all people.

This thought is emphasized in the last line of the quote: "*All flesh shall see the salvation of God.*" Luke stresses the universal aspect of God's salvation.

The only other time this particular word for "salvation" is used (*soterion*) in all of the gospels, is when Simeon sings: "...my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in the sight of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel" (2:30-32). What did Simeon see when he declares he has seen God's salvation? He had seen the infant Jesus and there was a change in Simeon's thinking about death.

Later in the gospel a closely related word is used (*soteria*) when Jesus tells Zacchaeus, "*Today salvation has come to this house*" (19:9). What had come to his house? Jesus had invited himself over and there was change in Zacchaeus' thinking about wealth. It is the power of the encounter with Jesus – the condition for the possibility of seeing salvation.

Notes:

3:1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar: Tiberius succeeded Augustus as emperor in 14 CE and reigned until 37 CE. The fifteenth year of his reign, depending on the method of calculating his first regnal year, would have fallen between 27 and 29 CE.

Pontius Pilate: prefect of Judea from 26 to 36 CE. The Jewish historian Josephus describes him as a greedy and ruthless prefect who had little regard for the local Jewish population and their religious practices (see Luke 13:1).

Herod: i.e., Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. He ruled over Galilee and Perea from 4 BCE. to 39 CE. His official title tetrarch means literally, "ruler of a quarter," but came to designate any subordinate prince. The gospels report Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great.

Philip: also a son of Herod the Great, tetrarch of the territory to the north and east of the Sea of Galilee from 4 B.C. to A.D. 34. Only two small areas of this territory are mentioned by Luke.

Ituraea: a short-lived principality located in the Biqâ valley of Lebanon.

Trachonitis was a region in the North Transjordan over which Herod Philip was tetrarch.

Lysanias: nothing is known about this Lysanias who is said here to have been tetrarch of Abilene, a tetrarchy named after its chief town, **Abila**, which is located 18 miles northwest of Damascus

3:2 during the high priesthood of Annas... Annas was high priest in Jerusalem between approximately 6 CE, when he was appointed by Quirinius, and 15 CE, when he was removed by Valerius Gratus. Thus he was in office when Jesus was born. **Caiaphas** was in the office of high priest during Jesus' Passion and Death.

The word of God came to John: Luke is alone among the New Testament writers in associating the preaching of John with a call from God. Luke is thereby identifying John with the prophets whose ministries began with similar calls. In Luke 7:26 John will be described as "more than a prophet"; he is also the precursor of Jesus (Luke 7:27), a transitional figure inaugurating the period of the fulfillment of prophecy and promise.

3:3 a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. See commentary for notes on baptism, repentance and forgiveness of sins. Though the Greek term for repentance means “a change of mind,” the Semitic concept involves a “turning,” an attitude that brings a change of direction (1 Kings 8:47; 13:33; Ps 78:34; Is 6:10; Ezek 3:19; Amos 4:6). A walk with God means submission to him and a change of direction.

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