

December 5, 2021  
Luke 3:1-6

Advent 2  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“In Real Time”**

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

As I was searching the basement for our Christmas decorations, I came across some old photo albums that I inherited from my parents. Several of these albums include pictures from my childhood, from when I was an infant through my early years of elementary school and into the awkward junior high and high school years. But other albums are much older, photos that were taken before I was born, going back to our family farm and my aunts and uncles when they were young. Finding these treasures gave me the opportunity to pause my annual search for decorations and take a few moments to look through these albums at the photos that capture moments that were shared with family and friends who are no longer among us. But there were also photos of people I did not recognize, from occasions that were unfamiliar to me. Unfortunately, my parents are no longer alive to share the stories behind those photos; but many of them included a date stamp so at least I could know the month and year when the photo was taken. It was a reminder that these events happened in real time; they were not mere legends or fictional stories, but authentic occasions that involved real people who played a significant role in my family and the legacy that continue in my generation of the family.

Time stamps on these old photographs helped me put the images in their proper historical context in our family history. Indeed, historical events that are captured in photographs, or family histories, or public records remind us that the events of our past are not a matter of myth or legend, something that happened “once upon a time” or “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” It is the reason why today’s Gospel lesson contains a “time stamp” that places the story of John the Baptist in real history, a reminder that *“God’s reign enters time and space on the stage of world history.”* (Audrey West). The introduction of the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist blends patterns from Greco-Roman historiography with the calling of the Hebrew prophets in the Old Testament. In the days before events were dated according to the years of the Christian era (which was initiated in AD 533 by Dionysius Exiguus), events were dated in relation to the rulers of the period or the number of years since the founding of Rome. The detailed correlation of the events of John’s ministry with the political events of the period reflects Luke’s attention to the form of historical writing, but it

also resonates with his emphasis that through Jesus God brought salvation to all persons: *“The coming of the Kingdom of God is set in relation to the events of the reigns of human rulers.”* (Alan Culpepper). Luke sets the stage for John’s prophetic call by introducing an A-list of earthly powers: an emperor, a governor, three tetrarchs, and two high priests: *“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 Tractonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”* (3:1-2). Together they represented the rulers of the known world, the regional lands, and the religious, political, and economic powers of that time; they held all the authority and might that their wealth, status, and power afforded them. The mention of their names and titles places the story of John the Baptist’s ministry in real time, a reminder that the coming of the Messiah for which John prepares the people is not a myth or legend but happened in the course of human history, that *“while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”* (Romans 5:6). It also sets the coming of Christ in the historical context of a period in which powerful individuals governed the people in often harsh and oppressive ways, seemingly holding all the power:

- *“Indeed, the world to which God sends the Messiah is a world held captive to earthly forms of domination and influence, represented in Luke’s Gospel by men like Tiberius, Pilate, Herod (Antipas), Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas. But, for Luke, the word of God does not come to any of those influential men of power, nor to the political territories over which they have command. It comes instead to a lone man out of the wilderness, John, son of Zechariah.”* – West.

The story of John the Baptist in Luke begins with the announcement to his parents of the birth of their son: *“In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.”* (1:5). Like their ancestors Abraham and Sarah, they were an older couple who had been unable to have children. But one day, as Zechariah is engaging in his priestly duties, and angel of the Lord appears to him and says *“do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.”* (1:13). The birth of this child will not only bring joy to this childless couple, but will also be the fulfillment of the promises of God proclaimed through the prophets:

- “You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” – 1:14-17.

The child of Zechariah and Elizabeth will be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi of the messenger whom the Lord will send “*to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you will seek will suddenly come to his temple.*” (Malachi 3:1). Upon the birth of this child, Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and speaks a word of prophecy that praises “*the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them*” (1:68) and looks forward to the prophetic ministry in which his son will fulfill God’s promise in preparing the way for the coming of the Lord:

- “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” – 1:76-79.

This child at whose birth Zechariah and Elizabeth rejoice “*grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.*” (1:80). Instead of following his father in serving near the Israelites’ holiest place on earth, John’s ministry is located in the wilderness, the region around the Jordan River, far from the seats of human power and authority. Here, at the “*liminal edge of the Promised Land*” (West), John fulfills his call to “go before” the Lord “*to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.*”

The call of John the Baptist to be a “*prophet of the Most High*” echoes the call of God’s prophets in the Old Testament that were also set in the context of the rulers of the eras in which they served:

- “On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), the word of the LORD came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in

the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the LORD was on him there.” – Ezekiel 1:2-3.

As a prophet, John the Baptist “*went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” (3:3). This baptism was a call to repentance accompanied by a water ritual, connected with references to washing in the Old Testament (“*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes...*” – Isaiah 1:16). Luke connects the work of John with the prophetic words spoken by Isaiah to the exiles in Babylon, a message of hope that God will redeem God’s people through “*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’*” (3:4; Isaiah 40:3). Luke’s account emphasized John’s role as a prophet, the call for ethical renewal in Israel, and the extension of the work of salvation to all peoples.

- “The introduction of the chapter, therefore, fixes the call of John to a prophetic ministry chronologically and describes that ministry as both the fulfillment of the prophets and the preparation for Jesus’ ministry. John’s preaching was an important part of God’s plan for Israel.” – Culpepper.

John’s ministry is a continuation of salvation history, the tradition of God’s dealing with the covenant people. The quote from Isaiah shows that God’s embrace of all nations (“... *and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*” – 3:6) is not a new theme but embedded in the tradition all along. The location of John’s ministry in the wilderness is not simply a place designation; it recalls Israel’s formation as God’s covenant people in the wilderness of Sinai and hence implies a return to God. John’s baptism was within his total ministry of preparing the way of the Lord, making the hearts of the people ready for the one soon to come “*who is mightier than I*” (3:16).

- “This man’s name was John, who was more than a prophet, who came not of his own accord but was sent from God. He was sent before the Lord, that he should knock at the hearts of the [people], and awaken them, and testify to the Lord, saying, ‘Open your gates and doors. Your Saviour, for whom you have been waiting so long, has arrived! Awake! Behold, the light is here, which was with God from the beginning and was eternal God, and is now a human being. Take heed and do not let this thing pass you by.’” – Martin Luther.

John the Baptist plays a critical role in the Advent season as we wait in hope and joy for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. John will be the one who will baptize our

Lord in the Jordan River at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, and he will be the one who will point his followers to the one who they are now to follow:

- “The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard this, and they followed Jesus.” – John 1:35-37.

As John called upon the people of his time in history to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord, his word calls to us in the moment in history to look for the coming of Christ into our time. The names that set the date of this story remind us that the first Christmas – and indeed the entire New Testament – occurred during a time of oppression from foreign powers and domestic collaborators, persons whose kingdoms were based on domination, violence, and death. It was a time when “*Rome pulled the strings of life in Jesus' time and place through a unique iteration of settler colonialism masked by puppet kings and empire-bankrolled priests.*” (Willie Dwayne Francois III). The word of John the Baptist calls out to us in our times to look for the coming of the Lord, the true King whose reign is based on love, freedom, and reconciliation. Christ is the King who comes to liberate, not to oppress; to build up and not tear down; to bring the gift of light into the darkness that surrounds us and seeks to overwhelm us. As the word was proclaimed by John in real time along the banks of the Jordan, the Word of God is spoken to us in the real times in which we are living, in the continuing darkness of the ongoing pandemic, a time filled with uncertainty, fear, violence, and doubt about the future of humanity and the planet on which we live. But it is in these real times that the word of hope that was spoken in the real times in which John the Baptist preached and in which Jesus Christ was born speaks to us the hope that is ours because of our faith in our Saviour who was born in human history and who lives in all times and all circumstances.

- “Very little is certain about this post-pandemic world, except for the promise represented by John's proclamation in the wilderness: God enters this time and this space in this period of history, so that ‘all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” (Luke 3:6).” – West.

I always enjoy look through our old photo albums, but at times I am frustrated by faces of persons who are my ancestors but whose names and life stories I do not know. Since my parents are no longer with us to identify these people and tell me something about their lives, I simply give thanks for these unknown people who are a part of my story and in some way contributed to the person I am today. The dates that are stamped on some of these photos give me the assurance that even though I

may not know who they were, they lived in real time and had a real influence on our family and the community that we have called home. Their names may have been lost and forgotten, but they are forever known by God who blessed them in this life and has called them to our eternal home where one day all God's people who have lived in all times in human history will be gathered into a place where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, the place where "*death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.*" (Revelation 21:4). As God has blessed God's people in the real times in which they lived, God will continue to abide with us and bless us in these real and often difficult times in the comfort of God's holy and certain hope and in the assurance that nothing will separate us from the love of God in the one who is to come, our Lord Jesus Christ.

- "The Christian hope is not grounded in the ultimate conquest of one philosophical or even theological system over another. The Christian hope, expressed most vividly at Advent, is grounded in the reality that the Jesus who came once in weakness and in meekness will come again in great glory, in judgment, justice, and power, to redeem the world, to save it from itself ... as we look forward to the return of the past, the rekindling of the lights that lead to Bethlehem, we look forward also to that which has not yet been, the lights that lead to the eternal victory we shall share in Jesus Christ." – Peter Gomes.

I loved fairy tales as a child, and I continue to be a fan of the *Star Wars* movies; but the stories that we share in this season of Advent and the coming Christmas season are neither fairy tales nor works of fiction. The preaching of John the Baptist did not happen "once upon a time," nor did the birth of Jesus happen "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." John the Baptist preached in the wilderness during the reign of Tiberius Caesar during the governorship of Pontius Pilate; Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the Roman occupation under Augustus Caesar, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. The Gospel we proclaim happened in real time, when Christ was born amid the suffering and persecution of God's people, so that in that little town of Bethlehem "*the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*" (ELW Hymn 279). The message that was first proclaimed in those real times is now announced in the real and difficult times in which we live, and it continues to be a message of light and hope as powerful as when "*on Jordan's banks the Baptist's cry announces that the Lord is nigh*" (ELW Hymn 249). The Word of God that is proclaimed to us is a real message of the real history of our faith, proclaimed to us in these real times so that we might know the real hope that is ours in the good news announced in to people facing the real struggles of real life: "*Look now, for glad and*

*golden hours come swiftly on the wing; oh, rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing!"* (ELW Hymn 282).

Amen.