

Providence Church (CREC)  
 Second Sunday of Advent  
 December 6th, 2009, 40th sermon  
 Sermon: Advent: Triumphal Preparation  
 Text: Luke 3:1-9  
 Pastor Uriesou T. Brito

Text: In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias 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 wilderness. 3 And 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 Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying 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 become straight,  
 and the rough places shall become level ways,  
 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

7 He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 9 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Prayer:

Sermon: People of God, we continue our Advent sermons on Luke’s gospel looking at different Advents of Christ. Last week, we saw Christ’s Triumphal Advent in his entry into Jerusalem. We saw how that triumphal entry was similar to Christ’s triumphal entry when He was born of the Virgin Mary.

On this Lord’s Day, we see His Triumphal Preparation as Christ begins his earthly ministry.

Our narrative is very detailed and precise, as one would expect from the pen of St. Luke. We see in verses one and two a vast resource of historical data. St. Luke is highly interested in detailing the rulers of regions within the Roman Empire. This serves at least two purposes:

First, it offers tangibility to the historical account. These are not pseudo names, but they are names of actual political figures. Luke describes them in “descending order of prestige.”<sup>1</sup> He begins with the King, Ethnarch (who is a ruler of the people), and a tetrarch (who is a ruler of a

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<sup>1</sup> Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary, Baker*. Pg. 199

small region). It is through this historical description that scholars and commentators have come to the conclusion that Jesus began his earthly ministry on the year AD 26. We know this because the birth of Christ occurred before the death of Herod the Great in 4BC. Thus, it is an acceptable dating to place the birth of Christ around 5BC. Therefore, His earthly ministry begins at age 30; the age of the priesthood.

Secondly, there is a theological reason for this description. I suggest that Luke's details serve to prove that as Christ begins His earthly ministry He will shatter the political structure from top to bottom. Everyone will be affected by the Kingdom of Christ.

This is the historical context, which prepares us for the Great Hero of our narrative, and the Great King of Kings. The one who prepares the way of the Lord is the greatest of all prophets,<sup>2</sup> John the Baptist. Luke has an interest in conveying the importance of John to his readers. In particular, the letter is written to Theophilus, who may have "occupied an important position in the Roman government."<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps why Luke uses this phraseology in verse two concerning John the Baptist, when He says that "The Word of God came to John." This phrase occurs nowhere in the New Testament, but it occurs repeatedly in the Old. We read that The Word of God came to "Abraham (Gen. 15:1), Samuel (I Sam. 15:10), Nathan (II Sam. 7:14), Elijah (I Kings 17:2), and ...Jeremiah."<sup>4</sup> Luke is stressing to the readers that John is as genuine a prophet as the earlier ones. In fact, he is greater than those prophets because He is introducing the greatest of all prophets, Christ Himself.

Throughout the Scriptures we see that God prepares His people before He comes in "judgment and deliverance."<sup>5</sup> "Moses came to deliver Israel, they rejected him, and he had to flee; later, he returned and Yahweh delivered His people (Acts 7:20-44). Samuel prepared the way for King David, Elijah for the ministry of Elisha, Daniel and Ezekiel for the restoration from exile. For John, the key preparation is the call to repentance and the promise of forgiveness (1:77; 3:3). A king is coming to deliver His people; instead of mustering an army, John gathers penitents."<sup>6</sup>

The message of a prophet is a message of impending judgment. John is coming as the New Moses warning Israel as Moses warned Pharaoh. And if John the Baptist is to be feared, then Jesus is to be feared more so, because He comes as the one who will bring ultimate judgment to this corrupt people. The message of the prophet is one of doom to those who are perishing, but it is gospel for those who repent. The message of John the Baptist is the message that the King is coming, and He is going to put the civil and social order into rights.

In verses four to six, "Luke quotes from Isaiah 40:3-5 to describe John's ministry (3:4-6). In that passage, Isaiah is predicting Israel's redemption from Babylonian exile, offering Israel hope of a "new Exodus." John's baptism fits into this setting. John assembles people in the wilderness

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 11:11.

<sup>3</sup> Hendriksen, 58.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 200.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Leithart makes several salient observations on this text at [Leithart.com](http://Leithart.com) (under Luke).

<sup>6</sup> Quotation from Leithart.

(3:2), as Israel was assembled in the wilderness in the days of Moses.”<sup>7</sup> As Peter Leithart observes:

Those who are baptized pass through the waters of the Jordan, as Israel passed through the waters of the Jordan into the Promised Land (Joshua 3). For those who accept John's baptism and repent as required, the exile is coming to an end. They are ready to re-conquer the land.”<sup>8</sup>

This is precisely why the baptism of John is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It was the equivalent of abandoning Egypt with Moses and following a new leader. You must go through the waters in order to be prepared for the Day of Judgment. John is announcing the end of exile. In baptism, Christ takes you into the land. This is why “those baptized by John cross the Jordan from exile back into the land.”<sup>9</sup> The baptism John announces is a baptism of identity. In other words, if you are ready to receive the King, then you must “prepare for (the) King's arrival by cleaning up.”<sup>10</sup>

There is a clear urgency in John's words. In verses seven to nine, the urgency is defined as the “wrath to come.” The axe is laid at the root of the tree, and the One who is coming already has a “winnowing fork” in His hand (vs. 17). Israel needs to repent and go through the waters of baptism. If they rely-- as some are relying--on their biological heritage as children of Abraham, verse eight says: “God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.”

Whatever “raising up children for Abraham from these stones” mean, it is a negative proposition. Whatever it means, relying on ethnic identity as a way of escaping judgment will not do. It is not biology that saves you, it is God's grace that does. In our evangelical culture there are some who embrace this idea concerning the Jews. One well-known author writes:

I'm not trying to convert the Jewish people to the Christian faith... In fact, trying to convert Jews is a waste of time. Jews already have a covenant with God and that has never been replaced by Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

But the text seems to equate this type of thinking with the worst of theological errors. The overall point of this passage is that unless you embrace the Messiah who is being introduced by the Forerunner, you will perish. Biology matters little apart from Messiah.

But the question arises, “What about the children of Abraham God will raise from stones?” What does that mean?

This word “stones” appears four times in the Gospel of Luke. In fact, we saw last week that if the people did not praise Messiah, God would make the stones to cry out. In that passage the stones

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<sup>7</sup> Leithart.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Leithart. As always, Leithart sees the whole of the picture, and his typology is always masterful.

<sup>9</sup> Leithart.

<sup>10</sup> Leithart.

<sup>11</sup> *Houston Chronicle*, April 30, 1988, sec. 6, pg. 1

are an allusion to Habakkuk where the stones of the temple cry out against the Jewish people. Their house witnesses against their spiritual corruption.

In this passage, John the Forerunner says that “his listeners cannot claim their Abrahamic lineage as protection against judgment.” If they rely upon Abrahamic heritage as their salvation, instead of Messiah who is the fulfillment of what Abraham spoke, then God will raise up children of Abraham from the stones.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas in Luke 19, Jesus is using stones as a reference to death, that is, the stones of the temple bear witness against them, in Luke 3, the stones here do not have a death theme, though there is judgment, but instead of death, the Forerunner has resurrection in mind. After all, God is going to raise children of Abraham from these stones.

Remember where John is; he is at the Jordan. And what is he trying to do? He is bringing a message of deliverance. He is calling the Jewish people to turn from their sins, and join the army of the Coming Messiah by being baptized. And to do so, they have to cross the Jordan in baptism and join the New Joshua<sup>13</sup> “in His conquest of the land.”<sup>14</sup>

Since this is the case, the Forerunner is taking us back to Joshua’s narrative in Joshua four. In Joshua four Yahweh tells Joshua that the men of Israel are to take twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel from the Jordan and place those stones and place them where they lodge. These stones serve as a memorial to them and their children that God will give them the land. Whether John the Forerunner is pointing to those same literal stones on the shore of the Jordan River centuries ago or whether he is simply using those stones as an example, the point seems to be that if Israel is not willing to embrace Messiah, and if they persist in acting like the first generation Jews who did not obey the Lord, God will raise a new army that will embrace His beloved Son and His kingdom. In other words, if Israel does not embrace the baptism of John, God will raise a greater Israel who will cross the Jordan and conquer the land. “If God needs an Israel with enough faith to take this Canaan, He can raise “these stones” from dead.”<sup>15</sup>

The mission of Christ in His Advent will be fulfilled one way or another. If certain peoples will not seek His kingdom, He will raise one that will. The coming of Christ is one of judgment, but it is also one of promise to those who embrace this baptism and embrace the mission of Messiah in this world.

### **How Shall We Then Live?**

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<sup>12</sup> My fellow CREC pastor Toby Sumpter provided some good and insightful thoughts on his blog.

<sup>13</sup> One point to make here is that understanding Joshua 4 is fundamental to see the “stones” connection in this text. I am fairly confident of this interpretation. Hendriksen’ interpretation that that God is using the “stones” as imagery of the hearts of stone (Ez. 36:26) seems reasonable, but misses the emphasis of the New Joshua coming into the New Land and claiming it as His own through baptism and repentance. See Hendriksen, 205. *Commentary on Luke*.

<sup>14</sup> From Sumpter’s blog.

<sup>15</sup> Sumpter, quoted in Mike Bull’s article <http://www.bullartistry.com.au/wp/2009/12/03/crying-stones/#more-3834>

There is a wealth of theological insights in this narrative concerning baptism.

The first point is a strong emphasis on the prophetic work of John the Forerunner. John received the Word of God, and His Word was a word of death or resurrection. This is certainly an unpleasant word in our own day, but it is the prophetic message. In the Scriptures, God has placed His word in the mouth of His servants to proclaim it. As the Word is preached it accomplishes its purpose of hardening or softening the heart. The application to you is to take heed to the Word of God; to engage its content; to seek understanding; to speak about it with one another. Do not allow the Word preached to go unheard in your hearts!

Secondly, it is hard not to stress the simplicity of John's message. He calls them to receive a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Whether infant or adult, this baptism is what marks you as God's own. It is in the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith:

...a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life: which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his Church until the end of the world.<sup>16</sup>

This is who you are! You cannot undo your baptism. You can reject it by abandoning the faith, but this morning you know that water goes both ways. It can bless you by cleansing you or it can kill you by flooding over you. Baptism implies a life of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Baptism does not work apart from repentance. This is precisely why verse eight calls us to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. How does this manifest itself? The text says that many are trusting in their family line as safeguard against judgment. The prophet John says that is foolish. It is true for infants that you are brought to the waters of baptism because your father and mother are faithful to God's covenant, but it is not your father and mother that save you, it is God alone. If you assume that you are safe because of the faithfulness of mom and dad, you are deceiving yourselves. If you assume that the Advent was a great historical fact, but that it does not affect the way you live your life, you are deceiving yourselves. If you assume any of these false notions, this Advent is nothing more than an ordinary season. The warning of John in verse nine should cause the ungodly to tremble: "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

The Triumphal Preparation for Messiah is accompanied with great consequences for those who repent and those who do not. This morning I bring you good news brothers and sisters. You are baptized, repentant, and a forgiven people. This morning you have already crossed the Jordan through baptism and you are now conquering the land through your Messiah; so let all flesh see the salvation of God in His Beloved Son. In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>16</sup>[http://reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://reformed.org/documents/westminster\\_conf\\_of\\_faith.html](http://reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://reformed.org/documents/westminster_conf_of_faith.html)