

December 7, 2003
Advent 2

"A Voice in the Wilderness Crying"

LUKE 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar-- when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene-- ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. ⁶ And all mankind will see God's salvation.'"

Over Thanksgiving Day weekend we were hiking up a mountain by Gaviota Pass. Coming down the trail was a black and white dog, a Border Collie, happily walking along the trail with its owners. It reminded me of a Border Collie that we had when I was a child named Tibby. What I remember most about that dog was its intelligence. We could give him commands such as "Get the cows" or "Nip" (the heel) to get the animal into a stall. As intelligent as that dog was, we could not carry on a conversation and communicate with him the way we did with other members of our family.

In the words just read to you about John the Baptist, we hear how the word of the Lord came to John the Baptist while he was in the wilderness. The mighty God, the creator of the universe, the great I Am, spoke directly to John the Baptist in words he could understand. John then became a voice for the Lord, crying out in the wilderness, calling people to repentance and pointing people to Jesus the Lamb of God who take away the world's sin.

As we think of this voice crying out in the wilderness, we are awed at how our God has revealed himself to us on the pages of the Bible in words and language that even a small child can begin to comprehend and believe. Martin Luther said the word of God is like a river, shallow enough in some places for a child to wade and deep enough in other places for an elephant to swim. As we listen to his voice speaking to us in his Word whatever our level of understanding might be, we become messengers or voices similar to John, calling out into the wilderness of the world in which we are living. You may not have had locusts and wild honey for breakfast this morning, and you may not be clothed in rough, scratchy coat of camel hair, and you did not sleep under the stars of the Jordan Valley, and you may not have the same level of conviction as John the Baptism, but your mission and mine is the same of that as John, pointing people to Jesus the Lamb of God. Let's take a closer look at these words of Scripture that speak of **"A Voice in the Wilderness Crying."**

1) The voice comes to us

The voice of the Lord that speaks to us is not limited to certain times and certain places.

That is made clear by the opening words of our text that tell us, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar-when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconiti and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene-during the priesthood of Annas and Caiphas." We might protest and say, "It is not the right time, it is not the right time." Tiberius Caesar held control of Rome. Two sons of Herod were serving as tetrarchs and they were worse than the two sons of Saddam Hussein. Annas and Caiphas, the high priests were better politicians than religious leaders. Pontius Pilate disdained and despised his tour of duty Palestine and we know what he did to Jesus.

What is the right time for God's Word to come to people? Today is December 7. 62 years ago on a sleepy Sunday morning Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor. It seemed to be the worst of times and the best of times. A nation aroused in anger prepared for war, but churches filled with people who wanted to hear the word of the Lord. They wanted the Lord to speak to them and give them a peace and comfort this world could give. Moms and dads prayed as they never prayed before, knowing their sons would die in war. They sought the voice of the Lord not in some mystical encounter in the moonlight or flickering flames of a fire on a cold winter night, but here in the pages of the Bible.

In the best of times and worst of times, the Lord's Word like a mighty powerful river, can break into your life, reveal things to you and set your life on a whole new course and direction as he did with John the Baptist. Something similar happened to Moses. At the age of 80 years the Lord appeared to him while herding sheep in the Sinai Peninsula. The Lord spoke from a burning bush and gave him marching orders to go back to Egypt where he was born, and tell the mighty Pharaoh to let his people go. Moses would serve as the mouth or voice for the Lord for next 40 years of his life. Listen to how the prophet Jeremiah describes the voice of the Lord coming to him. "The word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.'" For 60 plus years of his life this prophet shared the messages the Lord gave him with the people of Jerusalem.

When the word of the Lord came to John the Baptist in the desert, the events that made headlines in Rome under Pontius Pilate, or the Mid East under Herod's sons, or the city of Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate, were insignificant and unimportant compared to the amazing miracle that took place in the desert when God spoke to John. The Lord told John that Jesus would soon come on the scene and he would have the privilege of introducing him to the world with these now famous words, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

When Pearl Harbor was bombed President Roosevelt spoke to the American people with the words, "This will be a day that goes down in infamy." When the Twin Towers collapsed our current president stood before our people and promised to bring about justice in the first war of the 21st century. As important as these events are, they are insignificant compared to what happens when people pick up the Bible and God speaks to them on the pages of his Word and reveals to them that through Jesus they are part of a kingdom that can never be shaken or destroyed. And let me be so bold as to say that whether you bake cookies, or send out cards, or attend parties, or make it to the first showing of the Lord of the Rings, the King Returns, is insignificant and unimportant to the time that you spend in the Bible where God will speak to you, just as he spoke to John the Baptist in the desert.

The voice of God spoke to John in the wilderness area in the Jordan Valley. Look for your

quiet place to be alone with God, one on one, in his Word. In Psalm 46 the Lord says, "Be still and know that I am God, I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." Pray for a more simple life, less hectic, more quiet, more alone with the Lord speaking to you one on one in the page of the Bible.

2) The voice goes through us

When you spend time in the word and you listen to God speak to you, eventually these words of the Lord begin to fill every part of your life. You carry these words with you, and the words travel through you, the way electricity travels through a wire. That was certainly true of John the Baptist. He began to speak for the Lord in the country around the Jordan River Valley. "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John preached repentance. He told people how important it was to turn to the Lord and escape the wrath and judgment that was to come. He baptized people for the forgiveness of sins that Jesus would bring. People listened to the words of the Lord from the mouth of John. They were brought to faith, and they invited their friends and family members to come and hear what John had to say. Eventually large crowds of people were leaving Jerusalem, hiking down to the Jordan Valley and listening to John.

What happened in the life of John was no accident just as the voice of God's Word speaking to you and changing your heart is no accident. The Lord chose him even before he was born to be the one pointing people to Jesus and preparing people to see Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In fact, Isaiah the prophet spoke about this ministry of John 700 years before John was even born. "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.'"

In ancient times the roads were rough and crooked. To welcome a king, the road was made smooth, the rough places were filled in, the stones removed, and a smooth path was made for the king to come on his chariot. John the Baptist preached about God's judgment and the need for salvation with such clarity that people began to cry out, "What must I do to be saved? What must I do to escape the judgment to come? I am lost and hopeless. John gave them the peace that comes from seeing Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And when it comes to seeing Jesus and coming to him, we want to place no obstacles into the paths of people that might keep them from knowing about Jesus.

To illustrate how important it is to be a clear voice that points to Jesus, let me share a made up story about a man named Ben Tryin' who had lived a wild life and was facing only a short time to live. Ben's four sisters desperately wanted him to be saved before he died. The first sister came to him and told him it was not too late to say I am sorry and try to live a better life to make up for the wrongs he had done. Poor Ben looked up to her and said, "I've been tryin'. Another sister said, "Ben, if you only pray, just try to pray with me, and you will be saved." Poor Ben looked at her with sad eyes and said, "I've been tryin'. A third sister came and told him about Jesus and his birth in Bethlehem and his death on the cross, and then she said, "Ben, why don't you just pray with me right now and accept Jesus into your heart." Poor Ben looked at her with those sad eyes, and feebly

said, "I been tryin'. Then the fourth sister came, and talked to him about some of the bad things he had done his life, and confessed that she was no different and how all people have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Like John the Baptist she pointed to Jesus and talked about him as the one who takes away the sin of the world including everything Ben her brother had done wrong in his life. And when she said goodbye to Ben, she said, "Ben, Jesus loves you." That night something happened to Ben, he stopped trying. He heard the voice of Jesus calling to him, claiming him, making him his own.

That's the voice that still cries out this Christmas season, a voice that has come to us, and a voice that we are privileged to share with other people. God has spoken to us with a clear voice and showed us the blessings we have in Jesus, and the Lord wants to use your voice just as he used John.