

December 10, 2006
Advent 2

"Listen to the Voice Crying in the Wilderness"

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.'"

Poor Sport. It was not a good day to be a dog. He ran out into the field with his master, picked up the scent of pheasant and eagerly went in pursuit. As he ran along, nose to the ground, he picked up another scent, the scent of a rabbit and followed it instead of the pheasant. Suddenly he stopped. He smelled the scent of the fox. He excitedly followed the trail almost running in excitement. Then he stopped again and picked up the scent of a mouse. He eagerly pursued it. As he jumped up to pounce on his prey, he saw the mouse run into its hole. Exhausted and tired, his tongue hanging out, he laid down to catch his breath.

Ever feel like poor Sport in these days before Christmas. Presents to buy, cards to send, food to prepare, decorations to set up, parties to attend. We long for a time just to meditate and think about the words of the Christmas carols, or do some extra Bible reading, or listen to the magnificent strains of the Messiah, "For unto us a Child is born....."

Today we would like to spend some time together in a very remote place, a desert region, a wilderness area not east of Santa Maria, but east of Jerusalem, the Jordan Valley. It is in that valley that we hear a voice calling out to people, the voice of John the Baptist. He is preparing people to see the glory God about to be revealed in Jesus God's Son. We want that voice also to help us see more of God's glory and more of the salvation he has planned for all people. May the Holy Spirit bless us as we listen to this voice crying out in the wilderness asking us to get ready for the Lord to come to us.

We listen to a voice

It is amazing how the Lord our God has chosen to speak to certain people and then use them to relay important messages to us. We are told, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberias Caesar-when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herold tetrarch of Galilee, his brother tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abiline- during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiphaz, the word of the Lord came to John son of Zechariah in the desert."

Someone who is not familiar with the Bible might say, "Who gives a hoot about Herod the tetrarch of Galilee, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, and Tiberias Caesar? What relevance do they have for my life this morning?" Understand my dear Christians that God's Word came to John at a certain time in history. Luke the historian does not say, "Once upon a time, in a strange land and a strange place," as if this were some legend or fairy tale or some Gnostic gospel. He anchors the Word of God that came to John at a certain time and place in history. We can actually determine from history the approximate time God's Word came to John. If we wanted we could take a jet, fly to Israel, and walk in the Jordan Valley to the general area where the Word of the Lord came to John. One of our members has a bronze plaque on his garage that says "100 year ago, nothing important happened here." Not so with the Jordan Valley. About 1980 years ago something very important happened in the Jordan Valley. The Word of the Lord came to John.

We stand in awe of the way our God communicated with people in the past at certain times and places. 2 Peter 1 tells us, "Above all you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Hebrews 1 says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.

At a certain time and place our God recorded messages for us that really give meaning and understanding to what this celebration of Christmas is all about. You can open the Bible and listen to the voice of God tell you, "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and his name shall be called Wonderful, counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father the Prince of Peace." We can open the Bible and hear angels speak to us these comforting words: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior which is Christ the Lord."

Have you ever read one of these messages from the voice of God real slowly to yourself, emphasizing different words and phrases as you say it over and over again to yourself. Unto US a child is born. Unto us a CHILD is born. Unto a child is BORN. By emphasizing different points the verse can take on new meaning, new comfort, new peace and new joy in your life, especially on those days when things seem to spinning out of control.

We look at our salvation

Listening to the voice of God in the Bible is so important because God calls us to come and see the salvation he has prepared for us in Jesus his Son. We never grow tired and weary of taking the trip to Bethlehem, looking in a manger and seeing the baby Jesus, the Word made flesh, our Lord and God. We never get weary of stepping outside, looking up into the sky and wondering if this is the day Jesus will come and take us home to the place he has prepared for us. That's what God's word does. That's what John the Baptist did for people with his voice that spoke for God.

After John heard the voice of the Lord speak to him, he could not contain himself. He started preaching and baptizing people up and down the Jordan Valley. "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Picture yourself walking from Orcutt to the upper, remote regions of the Santa Ynez Valley to see a man dressed in rough camel's hair clothing, living off the land. It was the

voice of God speaking through John that drew people in large numbers from Jerusalem and the surrounding areas of Judea. Baptism and repentance and forgiveness of sins were proclaimed to people. He was fearless in telling people the truth about their lives. He talked about judgment day as fire burning dry branches. He talked about a person coming who was so great he was not worthy to bend down and untie the latches on his sandals.

It was John who prepared the people for the coming of Jesus. It was John who pointed the finger to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The baptism of John was no ritual washing so common to the Jews as they prepared themselves for some ceremony. This was a baptism of repentance, a repentance worked by God himself in the hearts and lives of people, just as our baptism works repentance in us today. John pointed to the true God bringing salvation to them in a spectacular way.

The work of John the Baptist was predicted long ago in the prophet Isaiah where it said, "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.'" It was John's job to picture the Savior coming across the desert. In vivid picture language of the desert he talks to people about leveling mountains, raising valleys, making crooked roads straight so nothing hinders Jesus from coming to people all over the world.

Is there anything you need to get out of your life this morning that is keeping you from seeing more of God's salvation and blessings in your life? Has your schedule become too full and too busy so you don't have time to spend even a couple of minutes a day in Bible reading and prayer? Have you been mistreating people lately, even members of your own family, and actually justifying what you are doing wrong rather than humbly praying, "God be merciful to me a sinner?" Do you have days when you feel sorry for yourself, see only your problems and troubles, and lose sight of the tremendous blessings that the child in the manger has for you? Then it is time to knock down the mountains of pride, level the valleys of despond and straighten out the paths of life that are crooked with sin. Your king is coming to you with his salvation.

It is hard to read this quote from Isaiah chapter 40 without going back into the chapter itself to see why John was so excited about the message he had to proclaim. It is the voice that cries out in the desert, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them." Did you see the commercial on television where the boy wakes up on Christmas morning, and sees a package from Best Buy in the middle of huge pile of packages under the tree? He takes a running leap and dives into the packages to retrieve what he perceives to be the latest and greatest video game package. The Lord blows on these electronics. Today's latest and greatest in electronics will someday take up space in the garage and await the final proper disposal in a dump. The flowers fade, the electronics become old, people get old and eventually we see them die. The word of God with its promises, the word lasts forever. That's what people heard from the voice of John the Baptist crying out in the desert.

But let's look more closely at the words of Isaiah that predicted the coming of this voice in the desert. "You who bring good tidings to Zion, get up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up and do not be afraid;

say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God.'" Run to the top of the highest mountain, lift up your voice with a shout. Tell the world to get ready because the Lord God is coming to them. Here is how he comes to them according to Isaiah, the message John preached: "See the Sovereign Lord comes with power and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him." Look at your God. Look at his power. Look at the rewards he brings you. You did not earn these rewards. You could not. Jesus earned the rewards for you. Peace with God. Everlasting life. Access to God in prayer. Love that never fails you. Look at your God coming to you, "He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." The mighty God is coming across the desert. The voice calls out for us to look at him. He comes like a shepherd. He holds the lamb in his arms. He comes with salvation for all people.

I believe I am safe in saying that is something all of us want more of this Christmas. We want more of the love that God has for us in Jesus his Son. We want to see the glory of God come to us with fresh eyes and open hearts. That's what the voice in the desert is calling us to see. Amen