

Advent 2
December 6, 2015

“The Word of God Came to John the Baptist”

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.'"

He was a rather interesting person. I think you would agree. I am talking about a man named John, John the Baptist. He did not drink alcohol and did not cut his hair as part of the vow that made him special to the Lord. He wore a coat made from the rough hair of a camel with a leather belt around his waist. He lived in the desert region east of the Jordan River subsisting on locusts and wild honey. It was here in this desert region that John starting preaching, not to the stones and bushes, but to people who came a long distance in large numbers from Jerusalem and the surrounding hills.

You see, dear Christian friends, John the Baptist was "The Voice." I am not talking about some great singing voice, but a voice calling out in the desert and pointing to Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. What made this voice so special? It was the Word of God that came to him and made him what he was. Then this Word of God came through him to other people. The Word of God come has come to you and made you special. It also comes through you to other people.

The Word of God came to John

Let's take a closer look at the time and circumstances under which the Word of God came to John. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar-when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconiti and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene-during the priesthood of Annas and Caiphas, the word of the Lord came to John son of Zechariah in the desert." The Word of God came to John when the Roman government was in total control of the lives of people. Tiberius was the emperor of Rome. Pontius Pilate was the governor in Judea. Then there were the notorious sons of Herod the Great Herod and Philip who had their own governing power. Rome even allowed the people of Israel to have their own high priests Annas and Caiphas as long as they did not defy the power and authority of Rome.

This total control by Rome was not all that bad. Rome had zero tolerance for any country that would start a war with another country, or for any terrorists that might threaten the lives of people, or any pirates that might make life miserable for people who traveled by

sea. This was the era in history of the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. Those who dared to destroy this peace of Rome suffered the agonizing death by crucifixion.

Great kingdoms of the world can provide their people with peace and prosperity in their lives, but they cannot provide peace with God and escape from the judgment to come. That can only come through Jesus, the Prince of Peace whose birth we celebrate this Christmas season.

The Word of God that came to John the Baptist brought a peace unlike any peace the Roman government or the high priest in Jerusalem might try to offer. The Word of God came to him through his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth. The first chapter in Luke describes them as "upright in the sight of God." That means John grew up with parents who taught him the word of God from the Old Testament with its promises of the Messiah who was to come. They took him to the temple where he saw the animals sacrificed that pictured the future sacrifice of Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Word of God also came to John in the desert just as the Word of God came to prophets in the Old Testament.

What did the Word of God do for John the Baptist? It worked repentance and humility in his heart. When people came to him in large numbers to hear him preach they asked if he might be some great prophet. John humbly said, "I am a voice calling the desert." When others asked if he might be the Messiah he spoke of someone coming after him "the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to tie." The Word of God came to John and convinced him that there was no way he could possibly removed one sin from his life by the special life he lived. The Word of God convinced John he needed Jesus the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.

What does this world need more than anything else? Some might say during this Christmas season, "Peace, we need peace!" Others might say, "Love, we need more love." When the Word of God comes to you it convinces you beyond any doubt that the greatest need for you and for every person on this earth is a Savior.

Once again we experienced evil in this country at an usually high level as people were killed by terrorists in San Bernardino. That is only a small fraction of the evil that exists in the hearts of people throughout the world. Romans 3 is not exaggerating when it says, "There is no one righteous, not even one: there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." You see the little girl in school who plots and plans in her mind how she will hurt another girl who has hurt here. See the husband and wife who are skilled at withholding affection from each other. Every single act of unkindness we see in others only underscores a similar problem we have in our hearts that will be held against us on judgment day if we do not have a Savior to deliver us.

John the Baptist found his peace with God in Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Roman government offered world peace but not peace with God. The United States of America can offer us the peace of knowing something is being done to keep further acts of terrorism from destroying our safety. Even this Christmas season with all the lights, and family gatherings, and acts of kindness can bring a certain level of

peace to people, but the ultimate gift of forgiveness for past sin and peace with God can only be found in Jesus.

The other day, at the place where I exercise, I noticed they were gathering Christmas cards to send to our soldiers who are serving our country. The cards were all posted on a wall. People had written personal messages in the soldiers. I am thankful there are people who are supporting our troops. However I was saddened to see so few cards that even mentioned Christmas or had some message of Jesus birth. The Word of God that came to John and to you needs to reach people throughout the world and right here in our community and circle of friends and family members.

The Word of God passed through John

The Word of God that came to John also passed through John to large crowds of people who made that trek from the Judean hills into the remote desert region east of the Jordan Valley. "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." He preached that forgiveness cannot be found in what you do to try and save yourself. He preached about forgiveness in Christ. He offered the blessing of baptism.

John did not change the Word of God that came to him and alter it so it would be more pleasing and acceptable to the sinful hearts of people. Seven hundred years before the prophet Isaiah predicted the message he would be preaching to people on the banks of the Jordan River. "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."

See the people preparing the royal highway for their king. Valleys are filled, mountains are made low, crooked roads are made straight and rough places made smooth. You my dear Christians are a road construction project in the hands of your Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit lifts you out of the low times in your life where you lose sight of the goodness and kindness of your God. The Holy Spirit convicts you that the mountains and hills of pride have no place when your King comes to you. The Holy Spirit says it is time to stop tolerating the crooked paths in your life where you ignore what God says and makes twisted and convoluted excuses for sinful behavior in your life.

John the Baptist preached a message of repentance. He knew the valleys of despond in his life, and the mountains of pride and the twisted and crooked thinking that comes with justifying sinful behavior. The Word of God called him to give these things up and look to Jesus the Lamb of God for forgiveness. If my king wants to place the treasure of his forgiveness in my hand, then I would not think of holding on to my sin and not giving it up to him. See my hand as it holds this trash of sin and foolish thinking that says I can save myself. It's time to throw away the trash and take the priceless forgiveness Jesus has to offer, more valuable than the largest diamond the world.

The late radio announcer Paul Harvey was fond of telling a story at Christmas to illustrate the importance of God speaking to us about his love. He told of a man who stayed home on Christmas Eve while his wife and children went to worship at the small church in the

village where they lived. A storm was coming in. In the quiet house he could hear the wind blowing through the trees and a strange thumping sound against the patio window. He stepped outside to see what the sound was and noticed birds trying to get into the patio window to escape the approaching storm. He tried to chase them away so they would not hurt themselves. He even opened the door to his shed and sprinkled birdseed on the ground to encourage them to seek refuge in the shed while the storm passed through. The birds refused the help he offered them. "If only I could become a bird and speak their language and tell them of this place where they could find refuge, maybe then they would listen to him." Then it dawned on him why his wife and children were in worship on Christmas Eve while he sat home waiting to open the presents. They wanted to hear how much God loved them and rescued them by giving them his Son. The Word of God came to John. The Word of God has come to you. With our voices we can tell everyone, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."