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Luke 3:1-6

Hope is on the Way

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Luke 3:1-6 New Revised Standard Version

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 Trachonitis, 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. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

The author of Luke’s Gospel is bit of a historian so he wants to make sure that we know all of the political leaders on the scene when Jesus is born. It would be like saying, in the eighteenth year of the twenty-first century, when Donald Trump was President of the United States, and Greg Abbot was governor of Texas, and Mike Rawlings was mayor of Dallas, and Michael McKee was Bishop of the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church, the word of the Lord came to Greenland Hills in East Dallas.

The word of God doesn’t come to the Emperor, or governor, or various rulers, or the high priests of the day. The word of God comes to John, a nobody by all historical accounts. God regularly chooses people whom the world sees as insignificant to do marvelous things. Whether it is John the Baptist, Mary the unwed mother, or the shepherds at the bottom of the economic ladder who are the audience for the heavenly choir. God chooses people the world easily ignores to participate in God’s world-changing, world-saving activity.

I remember in high school receiving an invitation to pay money and then I would be in the book of Who’s Who Among America’s High School students. But we don’t have to be celebrities or rulers or among the rich and powerful to be used by God. God works through ordinary people to do extraordinary things. God is eager to use our talents and abilities and gifts to change the world, even if it seems like it is in a very small way. God is at work in our relationships, in our jobs, in our family, and in our lives to make this world better. God is at work in and through our lives for the sake of the world God loves so much.

Our scripture today is about John the Baptist. When I think of John the Baptist I have to admit that I am a little put off. He was this weird guy with his camel’s hair clothes and diet of locusts and honey. He screams, “Repent!” to everyone that he sees. He is the guy on the street corner that you avoid eye contact with. When I think of preachers like John the Baptist, I think of kids who have been told to stay out of the cookie jar because God is watching. They preach of a God who seems to be more concerned with what we have done wrong. I wonder if God is more concerned about guarding the cookie jar or does God offer us a second cookie? I wonder if your image of God is more like a judge we can bribe or a giver of grace and love? Does your image of God more closely resemble one who accuses or one who affirms us and loves us as we are?

John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance in the Greek is the word metanoia, and it isn’t about saying I’m sorry, please forgive me. Metanoia means a change of heart and mind, it is an inner transformation. It is living God’s way instead of our way. It is saying no to consumerism, envy, greed, busyness. It is a new dawn for those trapped in death’s shadow, a new path, a way toward peace, and a is new life. It is wholeness and healing and salvation. The story of Christmas is a story of a God who is so faithfully for us and intent on being with us that God became human to help us embody the wholeness and fullness of life we’ve been made for. It’s a story of invitation and participation.

Danielle Shroyer tells a story in her book, *Original Sin: Putting Sin in its Rightful Place* about her young son who would get anxious when his mom left town. Danielle would ask her son, “Do you want me to tell you about the special red string again?” He would nod his little head and say yes and she would snuggle up with him in his bed and hold him. She would put her hand on his heart, and he would put his hand on her heart and Danielle would say, “When you were born, you were connected to me by a cord from my body to yours, and they cut it. But there is another string that still connects us, one they can never cut. It is an invisible red string of love between your heart and my heart. No matter how far I go, it stretches. No matter what you do, it is there. And it will always be with you.”[[1]](#footnote-1) At Christmas we are reminded that we are tethered to Christ with a thread that can never be broken and will always lead to life. Julius Trimble is the Methodist Bishop of Indiana and he tweeted these words this week, “If you have a song, sing it. If you have a story. Tell it. If you have a ministry. Do it. If you have a promise. Believe it. If you see a path, walk it. All things are yours. You belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.”[[2]](#footnote-2) We belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

John the Baptist is this voice crying out of the wilderness. We often think of the wilderness as this in-between place of testing and waiting and sacrifice where we don’t want to go. Wilderness is also a place of safety and divine provision.[[3]](#footnote-3) God leads Moses and the people of Israel through their 40 year journey in the wilderness, young to-be King David escapes to the wilderness to avoid Saul’s wrath, and the prophet Elijah flees from persecution into the wilderness.

John the Baptist is charged with the task of preparing the way of the Lord by announcing Jesus’ coming. Hope is on the way. God is with us in a baby born to a teenage mom. When Jesus came that night in Bethlehem, our world as we knew it began to change. The high and mighty were brought low, and the small and lowly were raised up. The mountain meeting the valley was made into a field where all were made equal in God’s kingdom. The ways that we looked at the hungry, the orphan, the widow, the prisoner, the sick, the refugee, all the vulnerable, began to change because of how Christ related to the world around him. As we get ready for the coming of Christ this Christmas, we prepare our hearts for where we might see God’s word among us. Sometimes I wonder if we would even know if the risen Christ had already come into our midst.

There is a short story written by the Jesuit priest Anthony De Mello about a monastery many years ago that was high on a hill in the quiet of the countryside. Travelers would come from thousands of miles away to be with the monks and sit, pray, and listen to the monks as they gathered together in community. As time passed there began to be fewer and fewer travelers to the monastery. As less travelers came, a fracture developed. Everyone had theories as to why this monastery was losing so many visitors: changing attitudes in the wider culture, a lack of time for spiritual things, and a general indifference. The monks even began to point fingers at one another for why there were so few visitors. Brother Lawrence had woken up many a guest with his loud snoring. Perhaps the guests were tired of having restless nights? Brother John’s prayers and meditations had been particularly uninspiring for the last few months. Perhaps they needed to find a leader with more passionate speaking ability? Brother Henry’s cooking was too bland, making the same potato soup every night. Perhaps the routine nature of their shared meals was getting in the way? The monks continued to point fingers at each other as time went by, each believing that if only the others would follow their own ideas, they could return to their former glory. And meanwhile, the stream of visitors continued to slow until one week when they did not receive any visitors at all.

A few weeks later, the monks were surprised to receive a letter from the head of their order after they held their morning prayer time: he had heard about how few visitors the monastery was receiving and wanted to come and see what was going on first hand. The monks were distraught and began blaming each other even more. “Look at what you’ve done, we will be shut down!” they shouted at one another. But as preparations to receive the head of the order fell into place, each monk became secretly pleased that the head would see what was going on and could set the others straight.

When the head of the order arrived a few weeks later, the monks began on their best behavior. They were courteous and made sure he was comfortable. It all seemed to be going smoothly on that first day, but this peace could not last. The next morning, after a bland meal and an even blander prayer, one of the monks couldn’t help but exclaim, “Do you see why we are struggling? Please correct my brothers so that we might return to our former glory.” And the rest of the room erupted, each monk making excuses and distributing blame on the others. The head of their order calmly looked around the room and observed the anger and frustration on each face. And after a few minutes, he stood up and left without a word, leaving the monks and the monastery to head home.

After this, the monks were resigned to the downfall of their beloved monastery. Faces were glum, the vibrancy completely gone. When they received a letter from the order the following week, no one wanted to open it, certain that it was bad news. “Thank you, brothers, for your hospitality,” the letter said. “I had heard tales that your monastery had grown sour and uninviting and came expecting it to be so. Can you imagine my surprise to discover that within your very walls, I came to find out that one of you was the risen Christ, quietly returned to earth but hidden from plain sight.” The monks put down the letter with a stunned silence—one of them, the returned Christ? No one seemed to fit the criteria, but they knew too that Christ often went in the stranger’s guise. Humbled and embarrassed, they each quietly swore to themselves that they would change their ways so as not to accidentally offend Christ. That night, as Brother Lawrence’s snored, none of the other monks could bring themselves to wake him up; after all, what if Brother Lawrence was Christ in disguise? During prayers, they listened carefully to the dull words of Brother John, for what if he was the Christ? Rather than grumbling over their potato soup, the monks thanked Brother Henry for his work, for what if Brother Henry was Christ?

The months passed by like this, and without anyone even realizing it, the halls of the monastery slowly began to fill once again with visitors. Each person who entered was given strict instructions to treat the other guests with love and respect, for even after trying for several months they still had not figured out who among them was the Christ. And by the end of the year, the monastery’s reputation had been restored, and once again people came from miles away to pray and to listen.

Is it too simplistic or idealistic to believe that merely treating our neighbor as Christ is enough to solve deep, systemic issues in our world? Probably, yes, but when terrible things happen in our world, we are quick to assign blame for allowing these things to happen. It’s a natural human reaction because we feel out of our control, and we want the problem to belong to someone else. But in this season of Advent we are asked to look inward, at the times we have blamed to deflect from the role we play. At the times we have stayed silent when we should have spoken up. At the times we have remained neutral when we should have acted as Christ’s hands, trying to repair the world in whatever small way we can. These weeks of Advent are about waiting and being watchful for every opening that we have to do good, to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. These weeks are about opening ourselves up to our willingness for a new beginning. Remember, the risen Christ might be sitting in the pew with you today.

1. Shroyer, Danielle. Original Blessing: Putting Sin in its Rightful Place. P. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://twitter.com/BishopTrimble [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=3894 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)