

John, Preparing the Way  
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December 8, 2024 – Advent 2  
Luke 3:1-6

He's ba-ack! Our favorite rabble rousing, doomsaying prophet has arrived for his annual repeat engagement to remind everyone to be baptized and repent – that's right, it's John the Baptist! The second Sunday of Advent is always all about him, so he is a character whom we all should know pretty well by now. All four gospels show John acting, prominently, as Jesus' warm-up act. He's the voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. Mark and Matthew both describe him as a rough sort of character. He lives alone out in the desert. He wears camel skins tied with a leather belt. He eats nothing but locusts and honey. He's probably in serious need of a bath. And yet, we are told that he and his message were so powerful that people still flocked to hear what he had to say and to receive his baptism. In John's gospel – not the same John; it's a popular name – most of these details are left out. He retains only the Baptizer's answer to the Jewish authority figures who come and ask him what he's up to: "I am not the Messiah... I baptize with water" (Jn 1:20, 26, NRSV).

It's from Luke that we get a much fuller historical and biographical sketch of this most important prophet. Luke alone provides an exact date for John's appearance in the wilderness: the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, which is around 29 or 30 CE. Luke is also very careful to place John, and later Jesus, within the wider context of the politics of their day through the extensive listing of who was in charge of what. The location in the wilderness is also important for two reasons. One, we know from sources outside the Bible that there were any number of populist movements active at that time. Nearly all of them were based in that same area - that is, the desert or

wilderness area outside of Jerusalem proper. To put John, and later Jesus, out there, is to associate them both with the groups actively pushing back against oppression. Two, in the Hebrew Scriptures, the wilderness is a place where God acts. It's where the people witness miracles and receive divine revelations, and where God bails them out over and over again despite their constant complaining and misbehaving.<sup>1</sup> With these bread crumbs, Luke is leading his readers to think that okay, we know from our history God does important things out in the desert. That's especially so when they involve turning the tables on the rich and powerful – and it appears that God is about to do it again. (Hold on to that thought.)

As for John himself, he is the long-awaited son of Zechariah, a priest in the Jerusalem temple, and Elizabeth, a descendant of Aaron, Moses' right-hand man, whom Luke describes as "barren" and "getting on in years" (Luke 1:7) When he was born, Zechariah, his father, was quite clear his name was to be John. It was not a name which had been used in his family to that point, which made clear to all of the outside observers that this child was going to be something special. All we're told about his coming of age is that "the hand of the Lord was with him" and that he "... grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel" (Luke 1:66, 80).

When we meet John for the first time as an adult, Luke tells us only that the word of God came to John in the wilderness (Lk 3:3b), and that John has headed over to the region around the Jordan to share it. Like his cousin Jesus would be, John is primarily a

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<sup>1</sup> William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Advent 2." <https://billloader.com/LkAdvent2.htm> [accessed December 2, 2024].

traveling preacher. "He doesn't even stay in the wilderness once he has received the word, and in this version no-one comes out to the desert or the river to see him." We don't even have a reason to think he limited himself to just one spot along the Jordan, either. His message is primarily one of the necessity for repentance – that is, metanoia, or change, accomplished in a Godward direction.<sup>2</sup> Luke finishes this introduction by comparing John to the prophet Isaiah. He gets right to it: John is the voice crying out, "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" (Luke 3:5-6).

Did you hear the "all shall see" in there? It is one of the first hints Luke provides to the effect that Jesus is for everyone, not just a select few. But what does it mean to "see salvation"? For Luke's Greek-speaking audience, to see something is to know it. So if one were to "see salvation," one would, almost immediately, know what it is – and that God had done it. It's an embodied response on our part, which suggests that maybe, just maybe, salvation is a thing of the present. It's not just some vague theological concept that tries to describe the afterlife; or some category on the list of what Christians believe; or even something meant to secure an uncertain future.<sup>3</sup> That something is no less than the promise that "God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of [God's] glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from [God]" (Baruch 5:9).

But how can we trust that this will be so?

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew McGowan, "The Place of John." <https://abmcg.substack.com/p/the-place-of-john> [accessed December 4, 2024].

<sup>3</sup> Karoline Lewis, "The Being of Salvation." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/the-being-of-salvation> [accessed December 2, 2024].

Our long history with God tells us that God can be trusted, even when God does something preposterous, like, say, drowning the entire Egyptian army, or delivering on a promise to give a child to a childless family, or becoming human. Sometimes it's not the easiest thing in the world for us to do. A case in point John's father, Zechariah. He didn't believe it when the angel told him he was going to be a father, and so he was made unable to talk until John was named. Sometimes engaging that trust means being willing to head out to the wilderness, as John and his followers did, and make big changes to the ways we live and work and watch out for others. As we will hear John say next week, change is precisely what it takes, though making those changes isn't out of reach for anyone. If even the tax collectors, who were considered the worst of the worst in those days, can do it, so can we – but only if we're willing to do the work to embrace it.

It's this truth that provides today's dose of hope. "It doesn't take much effort to imagine our world as a desert. Scarcity, isolation, hunger, and violence seem to rule the day. The pain and injustice around us can make us wonder whether God is at work in this wilderness. But Luke suggests that the wilderness is precisely where God provides what we need, so that we can now be the ones crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Michal Beth Dinkler, "Commentary on Luke 3:1-6." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/second-Sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-31-6-4> [accessed December 2, 2024].