

THE WATER IS FINE
Luke 3:1-20

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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Introduction

John is the forerunner to Jesus. He arrives and declares, “Get ready, Christ is coming.” He warns that people have to be changed in order to be ready to receive the Messiah. What is crooked must be made straight. When we deviate from the well-worn ways of God and follow our own ways, we are headed for destruction. Like a tiger overtaking his prey by surprise, the prophet John pounces upon our wayward path and proclaims, “You must repent!” Only along the road of humiliation, repentance, confession, and calling upon God will we finally receive salvation. What is lacking must be supplied; that which is in the way—pride and self-satisfaction—must be broken down.

The story of two miraculous births began Luke’s “orderly account.” Elizabeth was barren and elderly, but the angel of the Lord declared that God would bless her and Zacharias with a son—John. Mary, moreover, was a virgin, but the angel Gabriel said she would conceive and bear a son—Jesus. We should not be surprised, therefore, that the destinies of John and Jesus are linked together as part of God’s salvation plan, his arriving kingdom. Before Jesus begins his ministry, John takes center stage with a clarion call to repent.

Setting the Stage (Luke 3:1-2)

Before Luke tells us about John’s commission and ministry, he sets the stage by listing both the secular and religious authorities who were in power at the time of John’s arrival at the Jordan. The mention of the various secular and sacred authorities reminds us that God’s salvation story happened as a part of human history. In the Bethlehem baby, God steps into history and makes powerless those who were on Rome’s “who’s who” list.

Tiberius—Luke’s reference to the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius is the best piece of information by which we might date John’s arrival on the scene. Calculating from the time of Tiberius’s co-regency with Augustus (A.D. 11-12), we can project that our date for John’s ministry is somewhere around A.D. 26-27. The mention of Tiberius’s name, along with other Roman rulers, reminds us that the Roman Empire ruled the day.

Pilate—Pilate’s power was exercised as the prefect of Judea from A.D. 26-36. As such, he was responsible for all aspects of the Roman administration of the province. Known for his cruelty and excessive use of violence, Pilate was suspended from office in A.D. 37 and practically disappears from recorded history.

The Herods—The first Herod mentioned here is Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great), the tetrarch of Galilee. Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 29. Tetrarch

was a title used in the first century for a petty prince. The second Herod named is Philip, tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis. Being less ambitious than his brothers, Philip (also a son of Herod the Great) received only minor territories. He ruled until his death in A.D. 34.

Lysanias—Lysanias was fairly insignificant and was out of office by A.D. 37. Given his paucity of power, many scholars are surprised to find his name included among the Roman rulers.

Annas and Caiaphas—Having set forth the secular powers of the day, Luke now moves to the sacred. Annas was high priest from A.D. 6-15. He was followed, moreover, by five of his sons, his son-in-law Joseph Caiaphas (A.D. 18-37), and perhaps even a grandson. Therefore, while Caiaphas is the high priest of record when John and Jesus arrive on the scene, Annas seems to be high priest in reality, “puppeteering” the parade of relatives through the high priestly office.

We should observe two insights concerning Luke’s catalog of corrupt, worldly power brokers who were reigning over their individual realms when God begins to move in human history by the proclamation of John and the presence of Jesus. First, this list may be representative and interpretative of Mary’s song in Luke 1:52-53. As she learned about the pending arrival of our Lord, she declared, “He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed.” Fulfilling Mary’s insightful and prophetic proclamation, it is shocking that few today (2,000 years later) could identify Lysanias or even Tiberius, but millions upon millions know the name of Jesus and that of his forerunner, John. Secondly, with a stroke of narrative foreshadowing, Luke has now introduced us to four future characters who will play a role in the passion (crucifixion and resurrection) of our Christ—Pilate, Herod, Annas, and Caiaphas.

We cannot miss the most powerful statement of the opening verses, “...the word of God came to John...” John does not arrive as a scribe who interprets the word of God but, rather, as a prophet who preaches directly for God, announcing God’s impending judgment. Luke already told us in Zacharias’ prophecy that the child born to Elizabeth would “be called the prophet of the Most High, for [he] will go before the Lord to prepare His ways” (1:76).

This menu of men of power sets the stage for the arrival of John the Baptist; Luke now takes us beyond the powers to the place, “in the wilderness.” As opposed to those who were in the palaces, John finds his place in the wilderness. The word “wilderness” would refer to an uninhabited region. Jerome Murphy O’Connor concluded, “John did not choose this area simply because it had an available water supply or because of the symbolism of the wilderness but because he wanted to make a ‘deliberate prophetic gesture.’” Placing John in the wilderness indicates that he is the promised prophet of Isaiah 40, a voice calling in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3). The designation of “wilderness” recalls Israel’s own sojourn there (Jeremiah 2:2; Hosea 13:5; Amos 2:10; Acts 7:36). The wilderness was clearly perceived as the place where God would begin the renewal of his people (Hosea 2:14-15; 12:9). The wilderness, moreover, was also a place where other prophets went, expecting the coming activity of God (Matthew 24:26; Acts 21:38). And Elijah, whom John represented in the eyes of our Lord (Mark 9:11-13), was taken up in the wilderness beyond Jericho, across the Jordan. Lastly, the wilderness was associated with a new day, a new exodus when a prophet would arrive and declare deliverance for God’s people.

Preaching Repentance (Luke 3:3-6)

John's message is quite clear. Ancient Israel must repent and seek forgiveness for her sins in order to be prepared to receive the salvation of God which has arrived with the presence of Jesus. The word used for John's activity, "preach," is better translated "herald" or "announce." John's message is not mundane but, rather, quite unique. He is heralding a baptism, an immersion into humility and forgiveness to prepare God's people for what God is about to do when Jesus will proclaim, "Repent for the arrival of the kingdom of God is at hand" (Luke 4:18-19; 4:43). While other prophets had connected repentance and renewal with washing (Isaiah 1:16-17; 4:4; Ezekiel 36:25-26; Zechariah 13:1), John's clarion call for God's own people to immerse themselves in humility and repentance was unprecedented. Proselytes seeking to enter Judaism were sometimes immersed or baptized, but it would have been unheard of for a Israelites to submit to the baptismal waters.

While John's use of the Jordan's waters portrays a cleansing of the heart, his baptism was neither ultimate nor final. John's baptism boldly anticipates the arrival of Jesus and prepares God's people for the future baptism of the Spirit. Christian baptism, on the other hand, transcends John's baptism and vividly portrays the believer's participation with Jesus—we die with him; we are buried with him; and we rise with him—all portrayed in the plunging into and rising from the baptism waters (Romans 6:1-5).

We, at last, understand John's true mission as that of one crying in the wilderness in order to "make ready the way of the Lord." The "way" of the Lord is fitting for Luke, as he describes salvation as a continuity of a journey or a way. In fact, Luke's description of the Christians as followers of "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 16:17; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22) probably finds its foundation in Isaiah 40:3. Just like rough terrain obstructs travel, acting as a roadblock and hindrance, unrepentant hearts and smoldering sin block the way of our Lord into our hearts. Therefore, with changed hearts we are to make the way straight (easier) for the arrival of our Lord. Likewise, we are to bring down every hill or mountain that stands in the way. "To be made low" reminds us of the humility required earlier and elsewhere in Luke's Gospel (1:52; 14:11; 18:14). Calling for the crooked roads to be made straight, Luke offers an allusion to the corrupt generation that needs repentance in order to receive the arrival of good news found in Jesus.

In the summer of 1984, I noticed that Greenville Technological College in Greenville, South Carolina, was receiving a make-over. The landscaping was drastically improved, new signage was proudly displayed, and a few buildings were even re-bricked to bring a unified look to the campus. Noticing the beehive of activity at a once-sleepy college campus, I asked my father, who was a professor of medical technology at the college, "Why the radical beautification of a once-barren place?" I remember to this day (more than three decades later) his shocking reply: "President Reagan is visiting this fall, so we're getting a campus facelift." As a young man, I was utterly shocked that so much preparation and planning would be made for a few-hour visit from the most powerful man in the world. In the same fashion, like Isaiah calling God's people to get ready for Yahweh's kingly arrival, John the Baptist calls ancient Israel to make radical preparation for the coming of the Christ. The crooked must be straight; the high must be made low; and the rough terrain must be graded—all done for God's arrival in the person of Jesus.

Finally, as Isaiah has already said, “All flesh shall see the salvation of God.” With this declaration of salvation for all, Luke foreshadows the conclusion of his second volume, Acts 28:28, “Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.” While John’s own ministry may be more directed toward Israel (Luke 1:16; 3:3), it is but part of God’s larger plan of redeeming all humanity.

Fleeing the Wrath (Luke 3:7)

Labeling the crowd as a “brood of vipers,” John is highlighting the hopeless condition of “God’s people apart from true repentance.” Rather than depicting them as “true children of Abraham” (v. 8), they are the sons of poisonous snakes. Behind the shadowy image of the snakes lies the slithering notion of Satan (Revelation 12:9). Once again, Luke sees the cosmic conflict as between two opposing forces, good and evil or light and darkness (Luke 1:78-79; 2:8-9). Wondering who warned them to flee God’s wrath, John is implying that their certain doom can only be avoided by a true change of heart.

Bringing Forth Fruits (Luke 3:8-9)

This repentance, moreover, must be authentic and actual. If the repentance is fruitless (fake), an attempt to avoid God’s wrath through a mere dip in the Jordan will prove pointless.

By saying that God can turn stones into sons of Abraham, John is communicating that the true children of God are not identified by their birth into a covenant community but through response to God’s gracious initiative. Perhaps Luke is also echoing the prophet Isaiah when he uses the imagery of chopping down fruitless trees (Isaiah 10:33-34). The astounding part of John’s message, shockingly, is that the divine axe is not raised to remove the trees of Lebanon (Isaiah 10:33-34) but, rather, the trees of Israel.

Responding to the Call of Repentance (Luke 3:10-14)

Shocked by John’s prophetic warning concerning the coming wrath, his listeners sincerely seek a way out, a way to escape God’s pending judgment. “What should we do?” was the desperate cry of a people needing to repent. Having already called them to bear the fruit of a faithful heart, John gives them specific examples. Like the prophets of old, John sees real righteousness as evident in acts of social justice—clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, dealing fairly with the powerless, speaking the truth, and living in contentment. To the gathered crowd, tax collectors, and Roman soldiers, John issues an unwavering expectation that their changed hearts will be demonstrated by changed lives. Concerning the tax system of the Roman Empire, the lowest bidder was awarded the task of collecting tolls and customs in a particular region. In return, the collector awarded the contract would ramp up the tax rates in order to recoup his cost and make a handsome profit. Soldiers, moreover, often exercised tyranny over the people who were powerless.

Mistaking John for the Messiah (Luke 3:15-18)

John’s prophetic preaching stirred messianic expectations, and the crowd was all too ready to mistake John for the Messiah. Clarifying any confusion, John makes clear that while he baptizes them with water, the “one coming” will baptize them with the “Holy Spirit and fire.” John, moreover, is not even worthy to untie the thong of the Savior’s sandals. The baptism promised by John occurs in Luke’s second volume (Acts 2) when, at Pentecost, the arrival of the Spirit is accompanied by tongues of fire. Loosening the strap of a sandal was the lowest task for any servant

to do for his master. John shows his humble heart as he declares that he himself is not even worthy to do a servant's task for the Savior.

The long-awaited Messiah, the coming one, moreover, will exercise God's judgment with his winnowing fork. Tossing the whole harvest high into the air, the light-weight chaff will be carried off by the wind, while the heavier grain falls back to the floor. True character is always revealed by God's judgment.

Paying the Price (Luke 3:19-20)

Like Elijah taking on Ahab and Jezebel, John takes on Herod and Herodius. Unlike other Gospel accounts (Mark 6:17-19; Matthew 14:3-4), Luke does not give us the sordid details of Herod's horrid sin. Standing in antithesis to John's call to repentance, Herod Antipas divorced his wife in order to marry Herodius, the wife of his brother! In a continuation of this account, Luke makes clear that Herod eventually had John beheaded (Luke 9:9).

Leading the Way (Luke 3:21-22)

Notice that Luke wants you to know that Jesus joined all the people. Look at verse 21: "Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized...." Jesus Himself submits to the same obedience and conditions required of all of Israel. I'm often amused at people who are too proud to be baptized. Are you better than Jesus, who was willing to submit Himself to the command of God and join all the people in entering the waters, setting oneself inside the circle of obedience? And as Jesus is baptized, while He was praying heaven is opened – as prayer opens up the doorway between earth and heaven. Luke describes the Holy Spirit coming down in bodily form in the outward appearance of the dove, and a voice thunders from heaven making the definitive pronouncement to Jesus, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."

This baptismal event, the presence of the Spirit, and the proclamation from heaven is a sign for us, as readers of Luke's Gospel, that the ministry of Jesus has begun. The Messiah is here.

Look at verse 23: "And when He began His ministry...."

Conclusion

John issued a clarion call to repentance. The tax gatherers came, the soldiers came—everyday people like you and I joined John at the Jordan. They all came repenting of their sin, getting ready for the coming of the Christ. Make no mistake; there is no way to save our souls without true repentance. Always and everywhere, repentance is something sinners go through on their way to find salvation. Repentance calls for fruitful change, rebuilding our life in alignment with God's will.

What about you? The water is fine. It was fine enough for Jesus. It was fine enough for all the people. Is it fine enough for you? Is a call to repentance for you today? Is a call to obedience in baptism for you today? Is a call to join in all that God is doing in our midst for you today? Come on in, come on in –the water is fine.