

Notes for "Imminent Danger Requires Urgent Action"

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-6

### **Luke 3:1-6**

**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 Anna and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son 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 Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Reflection:

Imminent danger requires urgent action.

We don't have to do much these days to imagine events like floods, hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, tornadoes, and blizzards. Whether we have been personally impacted by rising tides or watched the events on the news, these images are all too real to us. In said events, if the authorities have enough warning, they do their best to get people out of their houses to keep them from danger. Some teams move from home to home and others sound alarms to announce that trouble is coming. Announcements are made on the local radio, tv, and articles are posted online. Upon receiving the news, the people should do what they can to respond.

Imminent danger requires urgent action.

## History to Scripture:

That was the feeling of the ancient cities, authorities, and people of Jesus' day when they suddenly found themselves under "several feet of water." Rome had been in rule for the last 100 years and it had become known as an empire ruled by fear and oppression. Everyone, especially the Jews, knew things couldn't go on as they were. It may have been the way things were, but it wasn't the way it had to be. The present state of the nation, which impacted every individual, was leading to destruction. Something had to happen. A decisive change in direction was needed. But what? To whom? Where?

For quite some time, the Jews had longed for a new word from God. There was some belief that prophecy had died out, but they hung on to the hope that it might one day return. The hope of God's chosen people was that God was going to bring about a movement in which God would renew the covenant and bring Israel out of slavery into a new kingdom. The hope was that God was going to come back to them, but they didn't know at all what that would look like. They speculated, but they didn't know.

## John the Baptist:

Then, unexpectedly, out of the wilderness comes John the Baptist. He comes sounding the alarm against the people's way of life and calling all to prepare the way. More specifically, as we find in Luke's narrative, John was calling all to repentance. You want a new way? You want to escape this slavery you are under? John declared, "Repent and 'return' to God with heart and soul." I don't think this is what the Jews had in mind, but it is what they got.

John was declaring what the prophet Isaiah had declared, "Prepare the way," for the Lord to return to his people. Now was the time. The rescue team had arrived. It was time to go.

Unfortunately, what John found was that the people weren't ready. They weren't in good shape. Everyone was in need of facing their own moral predicament. Work to prepare was still left to be done.

All four gospels begin the story of Jesus' public ministry by looking at John the Baptist.

John's role as preparer of the way was identified from his conception and naming, but Luke goes as far to declare it again in the account of Jesus' public ministry, using the words of Isaiah 40:3-5.

John is in the "wilderness" (referencing the stark and not very hospitable desert region along the Jordan River. The same territory through which the Israelites wandered on their journey from Egypt to the promised land). This wilderness is dangerous, filled with hostile people, wild beasts, and consistent scarcity of food and water. The wilderness is a place of testing, where people are challenged to rely on God for sustenance, and the

place from the which the wanderers are born as a new people, chosen and precious to God.

As the preparer of the way in the wilderness, John's message is simple: Repent. Why? For the forgiveness of sins.

Theology:

Repentance: a door to forgiveness- to let go- to turn around- to remove barriers and distractions- to prepare and be ready... uncomfortable.

As a practice, the church has latched tightly on to this charge from John. Part of our practice each week as we gather in worship together is to repent; to confess our sins before God and one another. Due to the nature of sin consuming us all, we recognize not only our individual shortcoming, but our corporate ones as well. We fall short. We are distracted. We turn our back on God. We have built walls that keep us from God's word, will, and way. Our practice each week is done prior to our hearing of God's word so that in our repentance, we can remove any debris that might be in the way. In essence, we prepare the way for the Lord to return to each of our hearts, and then empower us through the word read and proclaimed.

Now, before we get too far ahead of ourselves and begin to believe that repentance is solely reliant on our own power, we must remember that the whole reason we repent is based on God's grace. Repentance itself is a practice God gives to us so that we can experience God's grace. We do not just turn in a new direction decisively out of our own will and power. God helps, guides. Through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, God melts us, molds us, fills us, and then uses us.

John Calvin challenges us to find the gospel (the good news) in this passage rather than the law in John's message: "For John does not say, 'Repent ye, and in this way the kingdom of heaven will afterwards be at hand;' but first brings forward the grace of God, and then exhorts men to repent. Hence it is evident, that the foundation of repentance is the mercy of God, by which he restores the lost."

The North African church father Tertullian saw the same gospel truth: that call for "repentance should... prepare the home of the heart, by making it clean, for the Holy Spirit, who was about to supervene." Only God has the authority and power to let go of our sins; the humble and obedient response to the call to repentance is yes to God's reaching out to us to deliver us from evil.

Luke's ultimate belief and hope is that this good news of the gospel be shared with all. That all of God's people would receive God's gifts through repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Luke expands Isaiah's prophecy to the inclusion of all in God's salvific invitation and reaching out: Jews and gentiles, tax collectors and sinners, men and women, rich and poor, those who get on their hands and knees to straighten their rugs or those who polish the silver or those who don't. Luke's message is that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Application:

In Luke, John's baptism is the preparation for the ministry, life, and death of Jesus, because those who accept John's call show themselves humble before God and willing to submit to God's word, ready to acknowledge the Messiah. John's message confronts us, commands our attention, and demands our responses.

First step is repentance from sins. As Christians, this message can't be avoided. It must be addressed and it must be addressed with urgency.

We aren't always ready, are we? John highlights that when we aren't ready our lives are in jeopardy. We have got to get our act together. We have got to get ready.

It is likely we have all heard that Practice makes perfect. I used to go to bed at night in college, especially in the off season, with "Again, Again, Again, Do it again" Ringing in my ears. Practice was brutal. Repetition was key to success. If I wanted my talent and ability to show up in a game, when it mattered and was measured, then I needed to know, again and again, what it felt like in practice. I needed to work out the kinks and develop the right way of playing.

Advent is a season of practice and preparation. Have you ever wondered why we are doing it again? We do it again and again and again, not only because the story is worth repeating, but because it is central to who we are as Christians. The Advent season reminds us of the most important process of preparing the way. More specifically as Luke highlights from Isaiah, it is a season that calls us to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

In a season when we are often caught up in holiday decorating, cleaning, baking, hosting and attending parties, John the Baptist interrupts our schedules and demands (our busy-ness) with different preparations that need to be made. Above and beyond anything else, we are to be getting ready for Jesus.

The hard reality for us is that we are distracted. The truth is we can't really experience the true joy of Christmas and birth of Jesus, until we honestly examine ourselves and the world, which have a strong hold on our attention.

Kathy Beach-Verhey shares a story I can relate too... "When I was a teenager," she writes "I used to tease my mother about some of her most particular preparations for company. She

would get down on her hands and knees and comb the fringe of the oriental carpets in our living and dining rooms so that there were no knots and the entire fringe was perfectly lined up. It looked beautiful when she was finished- so neat and orderly. I tried to point out that one kick or shuffle of our guest's feet and the beautifully arranged fringe would all be in disarray again, but she would hear nothing of my analysis. She wanted everything, down to the fringe on the carpet, to be perfect when we were preparing for guests. She attended to every detail."

Playing hosts often causes us to look closer at our homes and examine our surroundings with a new perspective. We look closer than we have in some time at what needs to be repaired, fixed, and maybe even tossed out. Preparing for company demands a willingness to self-examine and do something as a result.

Somehow, I don't believe carpet fringes was what Isaiah or John had in mind when it came to straightening up.

As we prepare for the most important company to find rest in our hearts, let us all recognize the imminent danger we are in and respond with urgency. The "light of the world" Jesus Christ is coming, are you ready?"

Christian living is far more than repentance, but it is not less. We must first repent and return to God with heart and soul in order for anything else fruitful to be born in our lives.