

A Voice in the Wilderness

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[0 : 0 0] All right, well this morning as we continue our way through the Gospel of Luke, we've already covered now the first two chapters of the book. And just as a bit of a recap, these are some of the things that Luke has told us about.

The first sign that God was about to do something was the angel Gabriel appearing to Zechariah in the temple. And we heard the announcement of John's birth.

Then there was the appearance of the angel to Mary. And we heard the announcement of the birth of Jesus, the one who would be the Messiah and the Son of God. Then there was the miraculous conceptions of both women, one elderly and one a virgin.

Then we heard about the birth of John and then the birth of Jesus. We heard the prophetic praise of both Mary and Zechariah.

Luke told us about the circumcision and naming of both John and Jesus. And then there was the dedication of Jesus as an infant at the temple and the prophetic words that were spoken about him by Simeon and Anna.

[1 : 1 3] And then last Sunday, we heard about one memorable moment from Jesus' boyhood when he was 12 years old. We heard about Jesus' understanding of who he was.

And from there, Luke now fast forwards 18 years to the events leading up to the public ministry of Jesus.

And things began to unfold in this way. From Luke chapter 3, let me read the first couple verses for us. In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip, tetrarch of Aeturia and Trachonitis, and Lysanias, tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

So Luke anchors the chronology of this whole next part of the story in the historical reigns of several well-known political figures. We notice that there's been a change of emperor in the Roman Empire.

If we just glance back at Luke chapter 2, it says, In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree. Well, now there's a new Caesar, and it's Tiberius.

[2 : 4 7] Augustus, he ruled up until about 14 AD and died. But 10 years prior to this, he formally adopted his stepson, Tiberius, making him an heir to the imperial throne.

And Luke tells us that what we're about to read happened in the 15th year already of Tiberius' rule. Luke also lets us know who the local rulers were at the time in Israel.

And we notice here, too, that some things have changed. When Jesus was born, Herod was king of the whole land of Israel, though it was under Roman rule.

But not long after Jesus was born, King Herod died. Upon his death, Herod's kingdom was divided up into four parts, and his sons and daughters became the rulers of each of those parts.

Rome did not grant them the title of king or queen, but gave them the title of tetrarch, meaning ruler of a fourth part. By this time, the southern region of Judea, where Jerusalem is, is now a Roman province, and it's ruled by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

[4 : 04] And Galilee in the north is ruled by Herod the tetrarch. So this is not King Herod, but King Herod's son, a man who is named Herod Antipas.

So this kind of sets the political landscape for us. It helps us know when all this happened, and who's in power. And both Herod and Pilate are going to play a role in what's about to unfold.

So it's good to know a little bit of who they are. In addition to all this, Luke sets the landscape on the religious side of things a little bit, as far as the temple goes.

He says, this happened during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. And both of these men will also factor into what happens with Jesus. So this is kind of a long intro to what Luke is about to tell us.

But Luke wants us to know precisely when these things took place. He wants us to know this stuff that happened happened at a definite time.

[5 : 07] These are real people. And finally, we come to Luke's main statement in all of this. During the reigns of these men and the high priesthood of these men, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

The word of God came to John. This is a figure of speech that's often used in the Old Testament to describe how God would speak to people.

We often read there, the word of God or the word of the Lord came to men like Abram, Samuel, Nathan, Solomon, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and many more.

And the majority of these references describe not just how God spoke to people, but specifically how he spoke to men called prophets.

And these men were then tasked with relaying the word of God which came to them to the people, to others. In fact, I would argue that's the very essence of what a prophet is in the scriptures.

[6 : 23] It's a person to whom the word of God comes. They begin to hear the voice of God speaking to them and are responsible then to speak those same words to others.

So this statement of Luke's lets us know that there was a specific time when God began to speak to John, the son of Zechariah, and then threw him to the people.

He wasn't born a prophet. The sense we get here is that he didn't become a prophet until he began hearing the voice of God all these years later during the reigns of these men.

And so this is yet another sign that God is at work. And this one is going to be very visible compared to some of the other ones that many did not know about.

Do you remember what Gabriel said about John to his father Zechariah even before John was conceived? Gabriel said that John would go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

[7 : 41] Do you remember what Zechariah prophesied on the day that they named John when his tongue was set free and he was able to speak again? He said, So they waited about 30 years.

30 years. And then finally, God's word came true. The word of God came to John. John began hearing the voice of God while he was out in the wilderness and he began speaking the word of God to the people.

Verse 3. John went into all the country around the Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

So John begins traveling around kind of the lesser inhabited regions of the Jordan River and as he goes about, he is preaching. He is proclaiming the words that he is hearing from God.

And what does God have to say to people? Luke sums it up with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

[9 : 05] And that's a loaded phrase there. There's a lot in there. So we're going to unpack it. We'll go one word at a time. First of all, he was preaching a baptism. In other words, he was proclaiming that people should come and be baptized.

The word baptized is a transliteration of the Greek word baptizo. And it means to immerse or to plunge or to dip or to wash in water.

And so John was proclaiming that people should come and be dipped into the water of the Jordan River. And this physical immersion of people into the water had a symbolic spiritual meaning.

This baptism signified repentance. Repentance means to have a change of mind or a change of heart.

And it often includes an element of remorse or regret for wrongs done. The Bible frequently speaks of repenting of sins, which includes this idea of confessing or acknowledging to God the wrongs that we have done.

[10 : 29] So it's not just an intellectual change of mind like a change of beliefs. The call to repent is a call to personally own and admit your sins, your wrongs to the Lord.

And I can't emphasize this relational aspect of repentance enough. You know, this isn't just about seeing the negative consequences of our sins and then resolving to do something different or something better.

This is about understanding that in all our sins, we are sinning against God himself. There's a relational aspect there. We transgress against God himself.

And so repentance is this relational thing. And some of the most helpful words here are the words of Jesus, which he spoke later on in Luke.

Luke chapter 17, verse 3. Jesus says, If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them. And if they repent, forgive them.

[11 : 38] Even if they sin against you seven times in a day, and seven times come back to you saying, I repent, you must forgive them. Notice the relational nature of repentance.

It involves going to the person that you sinned against and acknowledging that you wronged them. Why would you do that?

Because the relationship is broken. And in order to restore it, you must go to that person. You must admit the wrong that you've done to that person and seek their forgiveness.

Now this example of repentance and forgiveness, which Jesus mentions here, is between human beings. But now John is calling people to repent of their sins against God.

And here's the wonderful good news. He was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. So come, repent of your sins against God.

[12 : 49] Confess the wrongs that you have done to Him. God is eager. He is willing to forgive you of your sins. Be dipped in this water here, now, right there in the Jordan, believing that God will wash you clean of the guilt of your sins against Him.

This is what the baptism symbolized. It was an act that God gave for people to do, very tangible, as they were confessing, as they were repenting.

They'd give that confession of their sins to God and then John would dip them in the water as a sort of tangible, visible, outward show of what God will do for the person who repents.

He will wash them clean. He will cleanse them of their guilt. And so this is what John is doing. He's going around the countryside of the Jordan River proclaiming that people should repent of their sins and be baptized and in so doing find God's forgiveness.

And Luke lets us know that as John went about and did this, an ancient word of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah was being fulfilled right in front of their eyes.

[14 : 14] John did all this as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet. And then he quotes the very words of Isaiah written some 700 years before this and these words come from Isaiah chapter 40.

A voice of one calling in the wilderness. 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 people will see God's salvation.

Now if you go back in your Bible to Isaiah and you look up this passage you'll notice the wording is a little different there and I just want to address that briefly. There are several reasons for this.

First of all Luke is writing this in Greek but Isaiah was penned in Hebrew. They are two different languages and therefore we expect to see some differences because no two languages have perfect word to word or phrase to phrase equivalents especially when it comes to poetry or figures of speech which this contains.

[15 : 33] So that's why we see a slight difference in the wording especially in the back half of the quote. We see crooked roads becoming straight as a translation for rough ground becoming level.

And we see the it of Isaiah 40 verse 5 specified by Luke as God's salvation. These were translation decisions made by those who produced the first Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint over 100 years before Jesus was born.

We also notice that Luke feels free to paraphrase and condense a few lines of this quote. He condenses and paraphrases Isaiah 40 verse 3 make straight paths for him instead of make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

And he also feels free to leave out the first line of Isaiah 40 verse 5. He just goes straight to and all people will see God's salvation. And so that's why we see some differences here if we look back.

But they shouldn't concern us or alarm us because there's natural reasons for these differences both in language and in the way that people often refer to or quote things that are written by others.

[16 : 58] In addition to that we trust and we believe that Luke quotes this the way that he does under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Let's dig into the meaning of these words though.

Isaiah says a voice of one calling in the wilderness. What is it that Isaiah was prophesying 700 years before this?

I mean we don't have time to look at the full context of the book of Isaiah or even chapter 40. But to sum it up Israel has been disobedient to God and God has promised to bring the punishment on them that he had foretold in the law of Moses.

But Isaiah 40 tells of how God will again in the future comfort his people and reveal himself to his people and save his people and restore them.

And these words of Isaiah quoted by Luke tell of how it will begin. It will begin with a voice calling out or crying out in the wilderness.

[18 : 17] Luke's saying that's what John the son of Zachariah was. He was that voice. Look at the details of the prophecy.

What is the voice crying out? What is the voice saying? The message of the voice is prepare the way for the Lord.

Make straight paths for him. to put it in other words. Get ready. The Lord God himself is coming.

He's coming to us. Let's prepare for his arrival. Until the prophecy foretold this voice calling out in the wilderness telling the people to get ready for the coming of the Lord.

And we should notice back in Isaiah where the prophecy is stated the Lord is the divine name of God. Prepare the way for Yahweh.

[19 : 33] And what follows this statement is a metaphorical poetic way of describing how we should prepare for his arrival. What should we do to get ready?

And Isaiah speaks with the language of road building. Prepare the way for him.

Make straight paths for him. If we glance back to Isaiah chapter 40, the original quote, the longer version in verse 3, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

The Lord God himself is coming to visit us and so let's get the road ready by which he will arrive to us. And then the lines which follow, we're back in Luke chapter 3 here, verse 5, are all about road building as well.

Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked road shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.

[20 : 46] All of this is figurative and poetic language which describes what happens when you build a highway. The point of a highway is to make travel easy and fast from one place to another.

And so rather than winding the narrow road from one place to the next, taking the easiest path in the landscape, highways are built in the most direct and straight way possible.

So when you come to a dip in the land or a valley, instead of going around that dip, the goal here is to make it faster, to make it direct. So we'll fill in that and put the highway right through.

if you want to travel by cart or carriage, pulled by an animal back in these days, this is important. The road can only be so steep.

You don't want to have a steep valley, staircase right in the middle of the road. How are you going to get down that with your animals? The same thing applies when you come to a hill or a mountain.

[21 : 59] I mean, you could build that road all the way around, but the whole point of a highway is for easy, fast, direct travel. And so if there's a hill in the way, let's flatten it down.

If there's a mountain, let's cut through it and make it low and level in the place where the road goes through because we don't want to waste time getting from here to there.

We don't want to have a crooked road that takes us farther out of the way and then has to come all the way back. We want that road straight. Make the road straight and make that road smooth.

We all know out here in rural Saskatchewan that those rough gravel roads are just a little slower and more difficult than the smooth paved asphalt of the highway.

All of this is the language of road building and making these kinds of changes to build a highway is a lot of work. Why go to all this effort?

[23 : 04] Why not just use the long and windy road with the difficult sections that we already have? And it has to do with the purpose of the road.

It has to do with who's going to be traveling on it. It has to do with that need for efficient travel between two places. Think about roads in our modern times.

roads. You know the roads that just don't get a lot of people traveling down them? They're usually gravel for a reason. If it's even less traveled than that it could be a dirt road and it could be almost impassable in some of the wet months.

So the number of people that are going from here to there increases the importance of that road or the goods that flow along that road increases the importance of the road and that's why we spend hundreds of millions of dollars adding lanes and paving and widening our major highways between our major cities.

But we'll just let the local grader do his best on that country road out by where all the farms are. I remember when they were still twinning some of the major highways in northern Alberta up to Grand Prairie it was a massive project on some stretches.

[24 : 30] The amount of dirt that had to be moved was amazing. There was all kinds of heavy machinery and equipment and there were trucks coming and going constantly taking dirt from where there was too much moving it over to where there wasn't enough trying to level it out so that that second part of the twinning would be level with the first.

Why go to all that work? Because the growing amount of traffic on that road required it. Industry which pays the bills needs those major arteries to move trees or oil or whatever equipment, parts, food, fuel.

people, I'm not an expert in it by any means, but I loved learning a little bit about the challenges involved with punching the railway through the Rockies to the west coast of Canada.

Insane amounts of work had to be done blasting through solid rock of the mountains and carefully planned tunnels and switchbacks. Why go to all that trouble?

Again, because of the importance of connecting that the western coast with the rest of the country. It's a massive amount of work, but the payoff is going to far outweigh that.

[25 : 58] But now let's look at the text. What's he talking about? What's the importance here? What's so significant that we need to go about making massive changes in the landscape to build a highway?

What's so important here is that God himself is coming? God himself is coming to his people.

The days of kings and queens are mostly behind us, but we still use the phrase once in a while, roll out the red carpet. Back in the day, you know, if the king of your country was coming to visit your little town, would you not make special preparations?

Would you not touch things up a little bit? Maybe he's going to stay at the local inn. Let's do something about this lumpy, dirty, muddy parking lot. You know, we're going to make that path smooth for him.

We're going to fix it up so that when he comes, he doesn't have to walk and get his feet all muddy and dirty between his carriage and the hotel. Queen Elizabeth came to visit in Regina in 2005 and my parents worked downtown at the time.

[27 : 20] My mom noticed that they spray painted the lawn of the Sask Hotel green before she arrived. I mean, it was probably more like a liquid dye or something, but you know, we do this sort of thing to honor royalty, people of great importance to us.

I mean, can you imagine the queen coming over from Europe and then staying at a hotel with all this crispy brown grass? Like, don't they have water here?

Fertilizer? Is this the best you could do? But these preparations should go far beyond that. This is not about some human king or queen coming.

It's about God himself coming to us. It's the Lord. It's the Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth. Prepare the way for him.

So absolutely, we should roll out the red carpet. Absolutely, let's knock that mountain down. Let's raise that valley up. Let's make a smooth highway, direct travel for him to arrive on.

[28 : 33] But hold on a second. What does that even mean? In what way is God coming? As we'll see next week, John declared the arrival of Jesus because in Jesus, God, the Lord, has come to us.

Jesus himself is the Lord incarnate, enfleshed, come to visit, come to live among us. It's maybe a different way than people were expecting.

So now, how do we get ready for him? How do we make preparations? In what sense are we to fill in the valleys and flatten the mountains and straighten the crooked and smooth the rough places?

Well, we need only to look down the page at what John told the people to do, to understand what kinds of changes Isaiah is talking about with his highway building metaphor.

And we see very quickly here that Isaiah and John are not talking about massive changes to the landscape in Israel. They're talking about massive changes to the landscape of our lives.

[30 : 03] In other words, preparations need to be made for the Lord's coming, but they don't involve changes to the earth, but changes to our hearts.

This brings us back to that key word that we heard earlier, repentance. There's a major need for changes to be made to get ready for God to come to us, to prepare ourselves to welcome the Lord.

These changes must start in here, with a turning away from sin and self toward God.

truthfully, moving actual mountains and filling actual valleys would be easier because we have some pretty tall mountains in here.

We have some pretty low valleys in here. We have some pretty crooked things in here. Some pretty rough places which need to be smooth.

[31 : 19] But let's not miss the last line quoted of Isaiah's prophecy. A voice is going to cry out in the wilderness for preparations to be made, to get ready for the coming of the Lord.

Some massive changes need to happen to welcome him, and all people will see God's salvation. All people will see God's salvation.

Isn't that so obviously what the story of Jesus is all about? God's saving us. And at the very center of his plan to save us is this man whom we're about to hear next week, whom John is declaring, Jesus.

never has God's salvation been so visible, so tangible, so flesh and blood, and yet so powerful and divine.

God's salvation is not just a plan hatched by God before the world began. His salvation is not just a concept of theology. His salvation is not some invisible intervention that cannot be explained at all or seen or understood.

[32 : 41] God's salvation is the person of Jesus Christ who all may see. Think about this.

He's going to walk through their streets, travel their country roads. The young and the old will see him. The rich and the poor will see him.

and he's going to deliver people from illnesses and injuries and even birth defects that have plagued them for years and he's going to do even more than that.

He's going to save people from their sins, from their guilt. All people will see God's salvation.

That's what Isaiah declared 700 years before this. And now the voice has come, Luke saying, John was that voice letting us know that the time is here.

[33 : 41] Next Sunday we're going to hear some of the actual words of John as he was doing this preaching of repentance, as he was preparing the people for the coming of the Lord.

And let me warn you, John's words, which as we heard, they came from God. The word of God came to John. John's words are not for the faint of heart.

If you want to talk about hellfire and brimstone preaching, John's preaching has some of that in it for sure.

But alongside of that is the greatest news that our world has ever heard, which John declared. More on that next Sunday.

For today, I wonder if you can begin to imagine yourself there in the land of Israel all those years ago. Can you imagine everybody in your country flocking out to this remote place by the river to hear this man whom they realized many was a prophet?

[34 : 48] can you imagine him preaching to you as you stand on the shore? Can you imagine him saying, come down here into the water, confess your sins to God.

You have sinned against him. We all have, but God is eager and willing to forgive you. repent, come, be cleansed, be washed of all your guilt.

God is merciful. He is mighty to save. He's about to come to us just as he said long ago. His great salvation is about to appear. His kingdom is near.

Would you go down into the water? would you confess? Would you seek God's forgiveness?

Would you be baptized in the water? These things are not just what people needed to do way back then.

[36 : 08] This thing of repentance is the thing that we all need to do. Even today, even now, in order to prepare ourselves to receive the Lord Jesus. Have you repented?

Have you confessed your sins to God? Have you sought his forgiveness? Many of us in this room have done this.

But if you haven't, God is waiting for you to do this. Jesus himself said that God is waiting like a loving father with his arms wide open, waiting for you to come home.

Have you repented? Have you come home? all of this sweet, powerful, wonderful forgiveness that's offered comes through Jesus Christ.

So I want to urge you, if you haven't done this, don't wait until it's too late to make your peace with God. as we're going to hear next Sunday from the words of John, there is a too late.

[37 : 37] There is a moment that comes when God says, I've given you ample opportunity and time and now you're going to get what you deserve because I am just.

There is a too late for those who ignore God's mercy. And so I want to urge you, just as John did, if you haven't done this, repent and believe the good news that God is eager and willing to forgive you.

He desires to save. He desires us to be washed clean as the baptism points to.

And so come to him, call out to him if you haven't done that already. Let's pray. Father in heaven, we thank you for the chance to know what happened in the days leading up to your son revealing himself to the whole nation.

Amen. Amen. Amen. for some of us it's maybe not the message we want to hear.

[39 : 02] Repent. But I pray that you would help us, Lord, for those who haven't done it, that you would help them to humbly bow before you and come to you.

and for those of us who have, Lord, I pray that we would remember that we live because of your mercy, your grace, your kindness, your eagerness to forgive.

love. We thank you for that, Lord. I pray that we wouldn't be ashamed of these words and this message, which was your message through John.

Lord, I even pray that we would be willing to speak these words to the people around us. Lord, we know it's not comfortable, we know it's not popular, but these are the words that prepare people, that get our hearts ready for salvation's arrival.

Give us courage, Lord, to speak them. I pray this in your name. Amen.