

LUKE 3:1–6. (EHV)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. He went into the whole region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Just as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
“Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight.
Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be made low.
The crooked will become straight, and the rough ways smooth.
And everyone will see the salvation of God.”

Let’s play a word association game. You don’t need to say anything out loud. Just listen to the word I say and think of the first word that comes to mind when you hear it. For instance, if I say, “Christmas,” you think... I obviously don’t know which word you thought of, but perhaps words like *peace, family, home, manger, baby, Jesus, angels, Bethlehem, carols, or presents* came to mind.

Let’s try another. When I say, “Winner,” you think... Again, I don’t *know* what you were thinking, but I’m guessing words like *Warriors, football, purple, community, hunting, ranching, Bakery, Chicken Dinner, or the correct answer, Trinity Lutheran Church.*

One more. When I say, “Repentance,” you think... I will gladly be wrong, but I’m guessing words like *sad, remorse, sorry, sin, or guilt* came to mind. We usually associate repentance with something negative. And it’s true that sadness and remorse do play a part in repentance. So when we hear that John the Baptist was “preaching a baptism of repentance,” and then we hear that he was telling the people to “prepare the way of the Lord,” our first inclination is to think that he’s telling us to feel bad for we’ve done. Get to work being better people. Stop sinning. Try harder to be the kind of person Jesus wants to be with.

But that’s not John’s emphasis at all with these words. John’s emphasis is a joyful one. When he says, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” we shouldn’t imagine a situation similar to when your mother surprises you with a phone call saying she’s coming for a visit this afternoon and your house looks like a sty. No, we should imagine a situation of excitement and anticipation similar to if a messenger would ride into a small backwoods village and tell the poor residents, “Make way for the king! The king is coming!”

Remorse and sadness may be our first association with repentance, but it dare not be our last or only association. John is telling us, “Prepare the way of the Lord! Prepare the way for a real king. Prepare the way for a redeeming king.”

1.

John first wants us to know that the king we need to prepare the way for is real. Luke wants us to know that too. He introduces John the Baptist this way: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was

tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.”

The television networks and the influencers of this world regularly do their best to convince you that the One in whom you believe is not real, or that the details of his existence are questionable at best. And their attempts are working to an extent. Another pastor once told me years ago that he had recently been talking to a woman who was convinced that there was really no evidence that Jesus existed.

That’s a bunch of baloney. Does this sound like a made-up story to you—“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas”? Especially when the majority of these characters are well documented as historical characters who indeed were all ruling or officiating at the same time?

Tiberius Caesar was born on November 16, 42 BC and became Roman Emperor upon the death of the previous emperor, Caesar Augustus, on August 19, 14 AD. Luke says John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, and that Jesus came to be baptized not long thereafter, in the fifteenth year of Tiberius’s reign, so sometime around 29 AD, when Tiberius was ruling from the island of Capri.

Pontius Pilate was appointed governor of Judea to succeed Valerius Gratus in 26 AD. He was probably appointed by Sejanus, who was left in charge when Tiberius went to live on Capri. He was governor for ten years until late 36 AD, when he was ordered back to Rome by Lucius Vitellius, the governor of Syria.

Herod Antipas and Philip were two of Herod the Great’s sons. When Herod the Great died in about 1 BC, he left his divided kingdom to his sons.

Lysanias is the only one in this list whom we don’t know more about other than what Luke tells us here.

Annas was high priest from 6–15 AD. He retained the honorary title of high priest even after Caiaphas was appointed high priest in 18 AD. Caiaphas served as high priest until late 36 AD, when Lucius Vitellius the governor of Syria replaced him with Jonathan the son of Annas.

John the Baptist and Jesus were real people who lived in our real world, a world filled with people who were born and who died the same as you and I.

But it isn’t just Luke who wants us to know that Jesus is real. John the Baptist also wants us to know that Jesus is a real king in another way: “Prepare the way of the *Lord*.” This King who was coming was a real king, that is, a perfect king, a righteous king, whose power came from himself and was not given to him by others.

The other rulers in charge when John the Baptist and Jesus arrived on the scene did not get their power from themselves. It was given to them by others, who either went before them or were more powerful than they. They were also far from being model rulers, far from being righteous rulers.

Remember how Tiberius Caesar was the emperor in 29 AD when John the Baptist arrived on the scene? One secular historian tells us that Tiberius was taller than average, strong, broad-shouldered, and handsome, with large eyes and very strong hands. But he also says that one of his teachers when he was younger used to call him “mud kneaded with blood.” And that name

proved to be more true than the teacher thought. That same historian tells us that a few days after he reached the island of Capri in 26 AD, a fisherman clambered up over the rock wall of the island and offered him one of the huge fish he had caught. Tiberius was so suspicious of everybody and so scared that a man could just sneak up on him like that that he immediately ordered the man thrown down and that he should have his face scrubbed raw with his fish. And while the man was enduring this unexpected penalty, he thanked his stars out loud that he hadn't offered the emperor the enormous crab he had caught, so Tiberius ordered one of his men to go down to his boat and get the crab also, and then had his face torn up with the crab too.

This same historian further mentions all sorts of shocking things that Tiberius did in the privacy of the island that would make the worst of what you could imagine look pretty tame. In the version of his works that I was reading, one side was Latin and the other English. In the section on what he did on Capri, both sides were in Latin. The translator refused to put the emperor's evils into intelligible words.

Or how about Herod the Great's family, including his two sons Herod Antipas and Philip? If you think any soap opera or reality television show has too much drama and filth, then you have not become sufficiently acquainted with the lives of the Herods. As one example, Philip married his niece Herodias. Then, while his brother Antipas was visiting him in his own house, he persuaded Herodias to leave his brother and come live with him. John the Baptist would later preach against this wrong, which led him to be thrown into prison and eventually beheaded by Herod Antipas.

Or how about the two high priests—one honorary and one actual? The man occupying this position was supposed to be Israel's greatest spiritual leader, the only man would could step foot into the Most Holy Place of the temple on the Day of Atonement. It used to happen that a man would serve as high priest for his entire able life, followed by his son for the rest of his able life, followed by his son, and so on.

But by Jesus's day, when Annas was high priest for nine years and Caiaphas for eighteen, that was considered to be a long time. Some men were fortunate to keep the position for a year. By then it was a position appointed by the Roman government, mostly to the highest bidder or the sweetest talker. Even though Annas himself apparently enjoyed a good reputation, his later family seems to have been known for their shady dealings. And the apostle John tells us of Caiaphas's rudeness. During one meeting of the Sanhedrin, he told those who were talking that they knew nothing at all (John 11:49).

These were the leaders of the people.

But make way, John the Baptist says. A real king is coming—the Lord. A perfect king. A righteous king. A king who would do what is just and right.

2.

But Jesus didn't just need to be a real king, a righteous king, to show these corrupt leaders how to do their job right. He needed to be a real king, a righteous king, in order to make *us* right.

Think back to the illustration we used earlier. The messenger rides in on horseback and tells the poor villagers, "Make way for the king! The king is coming!" What are the conditions

on which the king will be most joyfully received? The greater and kinder the king is, and the more desperate the condition of the people, the more gladly he will be received.

John has already shown us that this king could not be greater. He is the Lord. But how desperate are we for him? John the Baptist describes us all as “all flesh.” When the Bible talks about flesh, it is usually talking about the opposite of good.

“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit,” Jesus once said (John 3:6). That is, sinful people give birth to sinful people. Only the Holy Spirit can give birth to righteous people.

“Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,” the apostle Paul once wrote (1 Cor. 15:50). That is, we cannot enter heaven as we are right now—in our mortal, sinful condition.

We can try to make ourselves look better by comparing ourselves to these corrupt men, but do not boast that you haven’t scrubbed anyone’s face raw or indulged in every sort of sensual pleasure, do not boast that you haven’t stolen your brother’s wife directly from his own house, do not boast that you haven’t bribed or threatened or otherwise dealt shadily behind the scenes, do not boast about any of these things when you simply do not have the kind of power that these men had which enabled them to get away with these things for a time, or when you simply aren’t as bold and brazen as they are.

The fact is that in here, in our natural hearts, where it matters, we are flesh just like they. We are just as corrupt as they.

John tells us how corrupt. He says that even though the King is coming, between us and the king are some insurmountable obstacles. He calls them mountains and valleys.

We might think of the mountains as our sins of commission. Sins of commission are the sins we commit by doing something that God has commanded us not to do. God says, “Don’t steal.” We steal. God says, “Don’t lust.” We lust. God says, “Obey those in authority, like your teachers and the government.” We hand in sloppily done homework and blow through the four-way stop intersection, piling one sin on top of another into a mountain.

We might then think of the valleys as our sins of omission. And as tall as those mountains are, our valleys are just as steep. Sins of omission are those sins we commit by not doing something that God has commanded us to do. If you haven’t hurt anybody or picked on anybody, have you done anything to stop it when someone else was being hurt or picked on? If you haven’t used God’s name in vain, have you come to God’s defense when someone else did? If you yourselves come to church, do you show indifference about the fact that your children or other family members don’t? Do you pray regularly? Do you gladly listen to and read God’s word, not just here but also at home?

Yes, these mountains are tall and these valleys are steep. They are insurmountable.

But not for Jesus. He is not just a real king; he is also a redeeming king. “Every valley will be filled,” John says. King Jesus is coming, and he is the greatest landscaper. All of the valleys that separate us and him, he will fill in. In all of the places where we have failed, he will succeed. In all of the places where we have disobeyed, he will obey. In all of the places where we have sinned, he will be righteous. Thus he will pave a straight path to our heart.

“Every mountain and hill will be made low,” John says. King Jesus is coming, and he is the greatest excavator. But he does not excavate with machines. He excavates with his blood. He will take the punishment that we deserve for our sins by being crucified and forsaken by God,

and his blood will drip down from his cross onto Calvary, will drip down from Calvary onto each one of our mountains, all the mountains that separate him from us. Those drops of blood were infused with the water of our baptism, so that the water of our baptism melted those mountains right away, paving the way for Jesus to come to us on a smooth, straight, level road. As it says, John was preaching “a baptism of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins.*”

“All flesh will see God’s salvation,” John says. No matter what the mountains may be, Jesus is coming and he will remove them all. No matter what the valleys may be, Jesus is coming and he will fill them all. If you are sinful flesh, you will see God’s salvation. Jesus will live a righteous life for you. Jesus will take your punishment and die an innocent death for you.

Prepare the way! John says. A real king! A redeeming king! Ordinarily, if a king were coming, you would do your best to present yourself the opposite of how you are—a fine, clean, well-dressed, upstanding citizen. You need not put on any act for this king. He’s coming to fill in the valleys and remove the mountains, coming to wash you clean. Do not hide who you are from him. Present your obstacles to him so that he can level them. That’s repentance—remorse *and* faith in Jesus. When our lives are ones of repentance, our association with repentance is not just a negative one, but ultimately a joyful one. When our lives are ones of repentance, not only is the road between Jesus and you smooth, straight, and level. He also makes it so that the road between you and heaven is the same. Amen.