

***Luke 3:1-6. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—<sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup> As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. <sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. <sup>6</sup> And all mankind will see God’s salvation.”***

### **Pay Attention to John’s Timely Message.**

- 1. Sent by God at his appointed time**
- 2. Sent by God to prepare the way for the LORD.**

Prepare the way. Make straight paths. In the last week we have certainly seen something like that happening over and over again. Snow daily had to be plowed and blown away and shoveled; sidewalks and driveways and roads daily had to be cleared so that you could drive and walk. A path had to be cleared so that you wouldn’t stumble on your way, get hung up in a drift, or get stuck in the snow. It certainly is a timely picture that we have before us today. Prepare the way. Make straight paths.

However, John’s message is not just a timely message because the scheduled reading of this text lined up nicely with a Minnesota snowstorm. More importantly today we hear the voice of the one calling out in the desert with a timely message of repentance. We take heed to his voice, we pay attention, we listen to this timely message because it came at God’s appointed time and his message came to prepare the way for Jesus.

Our lesson today starts out much like a lesson with which we are much more familiar. In the familiar words of Luke chapter 2 Luke sets the historical stage for the birth of Jesus. Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken, while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Luke, the doctor with an eye for detail, again lays out the historical setting of an important factual event. This time, he establishes the setting for the beginning of John the Baptist’s ministry.

It was the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius Caesar's reign and all the pieces were in place according to God's plan. Annas and Caiaphas were together serving as high priest. Pontius Pilate and Herod Antipas were in power. We know that all these men would play a significant role in the death of Jesus. The time was set; the time had come for the Savior to come onto the scene, to begin his public ministry, and accomplish his plan of salvation by dying as the perfect sacrifice for sin. The characters were almost all in place. The promised forerunner would now come to set the stage for the coming Christ.

The leaders mentioned here in Luke chapter 3 all demonstrated the kind of pride and sinful behavior that were also characteristic among the people as a whole. Annas and Caiaphas were leading the people into spiritual ruin, Herod had stolen his brother Philip's wife, and Pontius Pilate was the face of Roman paganism in Judea and Jerusalem. This world was a wicked place and yet in his mercy God would send a messenger to prepare the hearts of many for the coming Savior.

It had been 400 years since a prophet of God called the people to repentance and God would now break his silence because John and his message were needed to prepare the way for Jesus. John would show the people that were under God's judgment because of their sin and that they needed a Savior to deliver them. John would point the people to Jesus as that Savior.

This was the time that God chose to send the foretold forerunner to prepare the way for Jesus. John message of repentance was for *all* people. No man was too powerful or too influential to be left out of this call. John even famously called out Herod for his sin of enticing away his brother's wife. Even though it would cost him his life John willingly and repeatedly called out, "Repent!" John's message called people to acknowledge and confess their sinfulness, to mourn over sin and find forgiveness in Christ.

The people were not as well off as they thought they were. Righteousness and peace with God would never come through the tainted things that they could, but salvation could only come from God and the Savior that he would send. ***"Prepare the way for the Lord... And all mankind will see God's salvation."*** This is the message that he John proclaimed throughout the county and even to the powerful leaders of the day.

We could say that John's message is certainly a timely message still today. We live in a nation and in a world with leaders who don't always make the best decisions for our country or in their personal lives. Religious organizations and leaders today are also guilty of proudly following their own way. Human beings are capable of horrible crimes and unspeakable acts of violence. John's message is timely. Repent!

With that said, however, we too need to listen to John's call. There is a proud part in all of us that thinks we don't need to listen. Even though we are aware of the call

to repentance, in our sinful pride we are at times quick to tune it out. In our selfish pride we are eager to overlook our own problems while we are swift to point out the problems of this world. *“They should watch out, they should repent, look at how wicked this world has gotten. Look at the sins of celebrities, and the sinful tactics and lives of government officials. Look at the immoral laws being passed and the good things left undone. Look at the horrors and crimes of this world. Look at all of this out there. Repent you sinful world! Turn back to God”*.

This is a timely message. It is true that there are many in this world that need to listen to the call to repentance. The sins of this world are great. But we need to pay attention too. You and I need to listen to that call to repentance as well. John’s call was not just for the powerful and the influential, not just for the publically immoral and the blatantly wicked. His message of repentance was for everyone. The wicked king and the humble servant, the average Joe and the powerful socialite, God’s Word calls all of us to sincerely confess our sins and trust in Jesus as our only way to salvation. John’s message was for all people. After all, John’s ministry didn’t start at the king’s palace, or even in the capital city, but his voice came crying out of the desert. And John proclaimed that message up and down the Jordan River to anyone and everyone who would listen. Yes, John’s message of repentance was for all, including you and me. [John] ***went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.***

This message is a timely one because the life of a baptized child of God is a life of daily repentance. Just because we have faith and we are members of his family doesn’t mean that we no longer need to repent. On the contrary, because we are children of God we are even more aware of our need for daily repentance. As believers we are aware of the dangers of letting selfish pride, and sin, build up. Like a snow drift blocking a driveway, this sinful pride can slowly build up and become a hindrance. But this drift of sin and pride can be much worse than a mere annoyance, it may prevent the LORD from coming into our hearts to make himself at home and do his work of strengthening our faith. With God’s help we daily need to tear down and clear away that which would get in the way of our faith and trust in Jesus.

John’s message was a timely message. John came with great forerunner’s zeal to prepare the way for Jesus, the Lamb of God. By God’s design he prepared the world for Jesus’ ministry. He exposed the sins of many and showed them their need for a Savior. Like a snowplow clearing a path to travel on, John cleared a path for the Savior to come on to the scene and begin his public ministry.

Today his call still prepares us for our Savior. His call to repentance knocks down mountains of arrogance and hills of pride that pile up in our hearts. He leads us to genuinely confess of our sins and humbly look to the Jesus our Savior for forgiveness and salvation. This call to repentance not only involves a sorrow over sin but it also

involves a trust in Jesus. His call makes straight our crooked paths and levels the rough places. And when the message does its work, the Lord plows away the pride, clears away the heaping mounds of our sin, and comes into our hearts with the warmth of his peace and the simple joy of sins forgiven. Each and every day the Lord prepares our hearts so that our faith is kept on solid footing so that we may walk on the straight paths that our God has laid out for so until that day we meet our Lord with confidence when he comes again.

This message of repentance is a timely message. Today our nation collectively aches after the events of the past week. As we struggle to comprehend the depths of wickedness of which mankind is capable we marvel at the goodness of God. We marvel that he would come into this world to save sinners. The sin of this world is great. Evil is found in part of this world, every corner of this nation, even in the most peaceful of communities, because evil dwells in every sinful heart. Evil dwells in the heart of every man, woman, and it dwells even in the hearts of children. And yet the Lord in unthinkable grace has mercy on us all. In his grace and mercy he came to this fallen and broken world. In his grace and mercy he became one of us, to save us, to forgive all our sins. He came to give us peace; he came to make us broken creatures whole, to give us the perfection that God demanded and we simply could not give him. In his grace Jesus makes us holy and blameless through his precious blood and innocent suffering and death. In his great love for us he makes a home in our hearts and he drives out the darkness and the wickedness, the sorrow and the despair, and he fills our hearts with the light and joy that only he brings; the joy that is our strength. He leads us in fruitful lives of repentance; lives that demonstrate his love so that others may see God's salvation in us.

As we prepare for the blessed celebration of Christmas. as we prepare to again recall the familiar words of Luke 2 and how God set the stage for Jesus when Quirinius was governor of Syria, so also let us also recall how God set the stage for the mission and ministry of Jesus in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Let us listen to the voice calling out in the desert. Let us pay attention to John's call to repentance, and let us thank God for the simple message that plows away pride and prepares our hearts to receive our coming Savior at Christmas and when he comes again in glory. Prepare the way. Make straight paths for him. Amen.