

Luke 3:1-6

Advent 2; December 5&6, 2021

When the Lord Comes Near, He Humbles His People

A lot can change in 30 years, can't it? By the end of 1991,

- the Soviet Union was dissolved from what it had been;
- both Eastern Airlines and Pan American World Airways both went under;
- the Dow topped 3,000 for the very first time;
- the World Wide Web was launched to the public,
- and Microsoft.com went online;
- Dr. Suess passed away;
- Kentucky Fried Chicken changed it's name to KFC;
- 60 minutes was the most popular TV show.
- A lot can change in 30 years.

A lot had changed in the 30 years for the children of Israel. At the time of Caesar Augustus, the time of Jesus' birth, the Jews enjoyed an unusual amount of toleration from the Romans. But in the 30 years between Luke chapter 2 and Luke chapter 3 that had eroded. The Roman state became more centralized. It demanded higher levels of compliance from its conquered people. Under Tiberius Caesar, the Roman ruler mentioned in verse 1 of our text, the Jews now found themselves being persecuted by the Romans.

A new governor had come to town shortly before our text. His name was Pontius Pilate. He had been appointed by Tiberius himself. Yet, this was not a post that people wanted to get assigned to, it was almost a second-hand post to get assigned to. However, Pilate's position gave him political power. His soldiers policed the civilian life. He was the head of the judicial system, with the power to carry out capital punishment. Coins have been found bearing his image because as Roman governor, he had control of the monetary system and collection of taxes. Corruption had become part of the Roman political system. Here in Jerusalem, it began with Pilate and worked its way down to the regional rulers of Herod and his brother, Philip. It didn't stop there though. Pilate had removed the High Priest, Annas, and replaced him with Caiaphas. So, now the Jews had two high priests, one appointed by the Roman Governor and the other chosen by the Jews. All this corruption was filled with bribes and underhanded dealing. Pilate had become ruthless, and his reputation was well-known. Pilate's hatred for the Jews was intense, and he deliberately infuriated them. A lot had changed in Jerusalem over 30 years.

The Jews wanted the Romans gone, but there wasn't much they could do about that. It's easy to see why they wanted a political Savior. Then John comes on the scene. He wasn't much to look at. His clothes were made from camel's hair. His dinner consisted of grasshoppers and honey. He lived in the wilderness. Even though John didn't ramp up anti-Roman rhetoric, he wasn't afraid to point out sin in the lives of people. John was different than the religious rulers of his day. People were flocking out of Jerusalem to see him. They were walking nearly 20 miles each way, through the wilderness, and up and down mountains. Many went out to see John with hopes and dreams. They were hoping that, maybe, a new kingdom was coming. They were hoping that a Savior was coming to rescue them from the oppressive Roman rule. The people were ready for change.

John would make it real clear that he was preaching about change. It just wasn't the change they were looking for. **"The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."** John's message was simple: Repent. God's people needed to be humbled. They needed to come down from those peaks of self-righteousness and see that they were living in the potholes of sin. He wanted people to look at the road of their heart and to see that it is in horrible condition. There is trash laying all over the place along that road. It is crooked. It is rough. If it is left alone, it is only going to lead to a dead end. It will not bring us to God if it is not rebuilt. Jesus himself would describe it in this way: **"For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."** (Matthew 15:19) They needed a Savior that Isaiah describes in our text. **"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."**

John's job was to prepare the hearts of the people for the Messiah who would do that for them. Even though some were looking for a political, John pointed them to a real Savior. What would cause people to walk 40 miles to listen to this "crazy" man in the wilderness? **"The WORD OF GOD came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."** It was his message. He wasn't speaking about what they had to do to have sins forgiven. He was pointing people to the one who would do it for them. The tools that would be used for this massive road construction project would be baptism and repentance. The outcome would be the forgiveness of sins. People's hearts would be changed through the Word of God.

Have you ever had someone arrive at your home either unexpectedly or with little notice? What do we do? Pick up the stuff laying around and toss it in the closet or another bedroom knowing that they won't see it there. But what would happen if they opened that door to that closet, or the basement or the garage. All that clutter and junk is still there. But John said that this Savior is the one who will remove the ugliness of sin.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God described how God would prepare the hearts of people. He described what he only could do. **"For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."** (Ezekiel 36:24-26) This Savior will give us everything we need. This Savior gives us hope. This Savior prepares our hearts to meet him. During this time of busyness in all of our lives, may we give thanks for the Savior who has humbled us and prepared our hearts for him. Amen.