

Sermon: **Getting Ready**

Text: Luke 3:1-6

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The year was something like 25 – 26 AD. But we don't have the numbers in Scripture. In the ancient world of Luke time was identified and measured by major events and more often by who was currently in charge politically. What king or Emperor was in power?

Have you ever noticed that the Christmas story... Luke's beautiful narrative of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem; the baby Jesus born in the stable and laid in a manger and the announcement of the angels to the shepherds on the hillside... is set in the timeframe of the reign of the Emperor Augustus? It begins like this:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered.

That was the world situation at the time. And so we have Joseph and Mary traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register.

If you were listening to the reading of the Gospel lesson (Luke 3:1-3), you couldn't help but notice that the story of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus' public ministry, is introduced by setting it in the contemporary political and religious world. Luke sets the scene by listing 5 of the current political rulers. It's the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberias, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Herod is ruler of Galilee and his brother is in charge of two other listed regions and Lysanius in charge of another. Luke then goes on to name the heads of the religious establishment at the time. Annas was a retired high priest who had retained a lot of prestige and clout, and his son-in-law Caiaphas is now the high priest.

Now this may not seem to be very significant to us, but it is. Luke is making it clear that this Christ event... the incarnation of God in Jesus, his birth, life, death and resurrection and all that we begin to celebrate at Christmas... is about God coming into the reality of our world. God is alive and active in the context of physical history. Luke anchors the story of Jesus in real history. Whatever the numerical date may have been, it took place in the context of what was going on in the world at the time. This is not simply a narrative written in a book, or a scriptural plot played out on a theater stage or in a Sunday school pageant. This is God revealing himself by breaking into the political and religious milieu of real life in a real world in real history.

Into this world setting... the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Augustus, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas... the word of the Lord came to John, and John went throughout the whole region calling people to get ready for the full disclosure of God in the coming of the Messiah.

This all took place by divine precedent and initiative. This wasn't the emperor's idea. It wasn't a program of the high priest. It wasn't determined by the astrological calculations of wise men. This was God speaking into the world. God speaks first; he always does. And God speaks last. This is not about human discovery of God. It is the divine revelation of God to humankind, coming to us to show himself and open up his way before us.

So whoever the powers of the world may be, God is supreme. *In the beginning was the Word. "I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."* As the psalmist put it, *The Lord is God. It is he that made us and not we ourselves. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*

But we in our human independence and arrogance think we can find our own way in life. We think that we can work all things together for good by our own initiative and creativity and ingenuity.

A news paper article this week described a current trend in western spirituality that might be called mix and match religion. The trend seems to be that we will work out a form of religion for ourselves; one that seems well suited to our felt needs and determined interests. We will pick and

choose from this and that religion and add some ideas and practices of varied spiritual guides to mix up some sort of spiritual tonic of our own design.

We think we can find our own way in life. We think we can track our own path. We think that we can straighten out the crooked, and can bridge the valleys and remove the mountains and smooth over the rough stuff.

But the story of the Bible and the history of human civilization show that we haven't done a very good job.

The word of the Lord came to John and he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and then quoted Isaiah saying, "Prepare the way of the *Lord*. Make ready the coming of the *Lord*. Make *his paths* straight."

In ancient times when a royal dignitary was expected to arrive at a city, the roadway would be cleared of obstacles and made straight and smooth in anticipation of the arrival of the honored one. Isaiah and John pick up on that image, speaking of preparing the way for the coming of the Christ.

And through them the word of the Lord comes to us. Make ready the way of Christ. Get ready for his coming.

It begins with repentance. We don't much like that word, do we. We find it easier and nicer to talk about Christmas hope and peace and joy in the abstract. Repentance seems so repressive in our enlightened and progressive world. Worse, it confronts us with the idea of sin, a word we like even less. But in fact, repentance is enlightening and life-giving!

Sin is not some categorical list of naughtys. In biblical terms, the essence of sin is our straying from the path of God; going our own way. It's turning to ourselves and sometimes in on ourselves as though we are the center of things. And as a result, we totally miss the mark and path of God's good way for us.

Repentance, then, is turning around to see the light and truth of God which is true enlightenment, and the way God sets before us. It involves changing our minds and redirecting our lives and beginning to follow God's way made know to us in Jesus Christ, God's way and truth and life.

To acknowledge our sin for what it is and to turn from it, and in the light of God to change our coarse and way, is to experience the fullness of God's gracious forgiveness and the abundance of his love. Our failure to acknowledge our wrong and insist on our ways is to diminish our lives. We deceive ourselves with delusions of our own self-righteousness.

Advent preparation begins with repentance and continues with ongoing spiritual roadwork. It is a time of self-examination as we consider the direction and path of life we are on. It demands honesty and the willingness to see and acknowledge our sin and to turn from it and to reorient our lives by following in the way of God and stepping onto the path of his leading. It is to experience God's cleansing and forgiveness and renewed fellowship as we walk with him.

Advent preparation is making ready for his coming into our lives in newer and deeper ways.

Maybe some of us have some roadwork to do this Advent. Maybe we need to get a few things straightened out in our walk with God or in our relationship with others, perhaps our families. Maybe we need to clear the clutter from our lives... the things that get in the way and cause us to trip and stumble or send us off in wrong directions. We may have to reevaluate our values and reestablish our priorities.

Let us all hear the word of the Lord through John, and make ready the coming of Christ, clearing the way for his arrival.

And may we each truly experience the hope and peace and joy that Christ brings with him into our lives.

Amen.