

*Luke 3:1-6* <sup>1</sup> Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, <sup>4</sup> as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. <sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; <sup>6</sup> And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' "

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Today, we take a trip out to the wilderness. We gather around the one prophesied long before his time by Isaiah the prophet. The crowds are all gathered around. The sinners are there. The religious elites are there as well. The average Joe has also made his way into the crowd. They all gather around to hear this voice crying in the wilderness. And what is his cry? "The Lord is coming, repent."

Even today when someone really important comes to a town, the path or roads that he or she will travel is all cleaned up. While I was in St. Louis, the Pope made a visit to that city. He was schedule to drive through a park that is not far from the seminary. That park in preparation for his arrival got a major overhaul. Trash was picked up, the roads were made smooth, and all the surrounding area was made just as prefect as possible. All of those preparations were done to make the Pope's visit just as easy as possible.

In essence that is much like what John is doing in the wilderness as well. He is trying to spruce up the scene that Jesus will soon begin to walk onto. John's job was to make Jesus' coming as pleasant as possible. When Jesus would come, He would have two things that would control most of his time. First, he would bring judgment upon those who thought themselves too good to even think about things like true repentance. But this was not what Jesus really wanted to spend his time doing on this earth. What He really wanted to do when He came was proclaim good news to those who realized their need for it. So John's purpose was to call people to repentance so that when Jesus arrived He could just be in the business of handing out grace, and not need to dole out judgment.

Every person that repented was another pothole filled, another piece of trash removed from the scene for Christ's arrival. Every person who submitted to John's baptism was a valley being filled and a path being made straight. The more people that repented because of John's ministry, the more time Jesus would be able to spend just comforting repentant hearts in His ministry.

Of course there were some, most notably the Pharisees and Sadducees, who thought themselves too holy to step into the Jordan and be baptized by this renegade preacher in the wilderness. They were sure that they were as smooth as silk and had no low places to be filled or crooked ways to be straightened. So they rejected the call to repentance. They didn't prepare for Christ's coming as they should have.

Many others though thankfully did heed John's call to repentance. They stepped into the water because they knew that their lives were dirty. They knew that they needed to be washed. They needed to hear some good news.

And John's message was proved faithful. When the Christ entered the scene, those who came after Him with repentant hearts prepared by John's message, Jesus showed great mercy, great love, and great forgiveness. Yes, those were the times where Jesus got to do exactly what he wanted, bring hope to those who were hopeless, bring release to those that were bound, and bring life to those who were dead in sin. But to those who continued to maintain their lack of need for forgiveness, Jesus came with great judgment, great wrath, great anger. He continued to remind them that those who walked so proudly before God were not his children, but rather were Satan's children instead.

As you stand in the crowd today listening to the voice crying in the wilderness, there are the same two responses available to you today as well. This advent season is our time in the wilderness to heed the call of the crying voice. I urge you to go way of true repentance. Take this time in the church year to really search your lives for evidence of or the prevalence of sin. Begin to examine yourself by placing your life up against the mirror of the Ten Commandments and see when you have fallen short. As you gather here to in church to corporately confess your sins, don't just say the words, but lay your

specific sinful ways at Christ's feet. As you spend time examining your life, you more and more will realize that you need the One who is coming. You need good news. You need the Messiah.

Unfortunately, the other option is perhaps easier to do. You can ignore, even reject the call to repentance. You can tell yourself that while you may have flaws, you are pretty good and righteous in comparison to others you know. You can in your mind and by your actions walk proudly before God as if he ought take notice of you and smile at each thing you have done. You can speak the words of corporate confession in this season without ever truly meaning a word of it. You can forget exactly how much of a poor and miserable sinner you have been. If you in this advent season don't really take time to examine your life for sin, you will not be truly prepared for Christmas, for the coming of the Lord. Jesus will be forced then to come to you in judgment and wrath to shake you out of your comfort with your sin.

But if you heed to call of the one in the wilderness, you can truly wait for Christmas with the anticipation of little child. You can await that Christmas day when Jesus comes to you again knowing that the He who comes bring only Good News to those who meet Him with repentance in their hearts. He will come into your life anew to hand out His gifts of grace and mercy. Nothing makes God happier than handing out his gifts to his people. At least for God, the old adage is true: It is better to give than to receive. He loves to meet people who recognize their emptiness in order that He might fill them full with his love. He loves to meet people that have been prepared for Christmas by Advent.

Luther echoes this same message when he teaches about the Lord supper which we receive today. Who is worthy to receive the supper he asks? He who believes the words "for you" and "for your salvation." Those that approach the altar today with repentant hearts receive the coming of the Lord with His full grace and mercy. Those who come believing that for you and for your forgiveness is exactly the word they need to hear, not

only hear the words, but receive the gifts promised in the words, His very body and blood.

This is also finally true of Christ's last coming. Those who in humble repentance are in faith awaiting His return will find only grace and not wrath. But those who saw no need for God will perish.

Today, we prepare for all three of Christ's comings by repenting of our sins, and waiting for salvation from the One who comes after John. We repent and wait for Jesus. Amen.