

# A Voice Crying Out In the Wilderness

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Text: Luke 3:1-6

Today's gospel lesson takes us first to the halls of power. It tells us one by one the earthly rulers who hold sway in the ancient world. First there is Emperor Tiberius, who had forsaken the city of Rome to spend his days in luxury and dissipation on the island of Capri. Then comes Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea, whom we know from his role in Jesus' crucifixion, a cunning and brutal man. Next are the Herodians—not King Herod the Great, who had died many years before, but his heirs Herod Antipas and Philip, who ruled in the northern regions of Palestine, along with Lysanias. And last of all come Annas and Caiaphas, the Jewish high priests in Jerusalem. What a gathering of luminaries this is! These are the movers and shakers of the early first century Roman East. They have the power to compel the payment of taxes, the power to order executions and to make war. They hold sway over the lives of millions of people. They hold power beyond the wildest imagination of one of their ordinary Jewish subjects. And Luke very painstakingly informs us that they are the ones in charge, sitting on thrones, holding their scepters and wearing their crowns, during the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.

But then Luke surprises us. Because the word of God doesn't come to any of them. The word of God is God speaking, but it is so much more. The word of God is the creative force that brings something new into the world. At the beginning of creation, the word of God spoke light into the darkness and formed the world's creatures. The word of God called Abraham and Sarah to go on a journey and formed a covenant people, a special vehicle for God's blessing of all the families of the earth. The word of God rescued a people from slavery and brought God's blessing and judgment on kings and nations through the prophets. When the word of God comes, things are bound to change, because the word of God, unlike our words, does not simply describe reality, but shapes, molds, and transforms what *is* into what has never before existed.

But the word of God does not come to Emperor Tiberius or his governor Pilate in Caesarea. The world-shaking, creative power of the word of God doesn't come to Herod or Philip or Lysanias. It doesn't even come to the religious leaders Annas and Caiaphas. The word of God does not touch down in the throne room, the cathedral, the military barracks. No, the universe-creating, soul-making, heaven-rending word of God, Luke says, came to John son of Zechariah *in the wilderness*. The word of God bypasses the corridors of power and crashes headlong like a bolt of lightning into a desert hermit, the son of a minor priestly family. If you're looking for where God is active and at work remaking the world, don't look at any of its powerful rulers, because God's word has come to a nobody in the wilderness.

There is good news found already in the democratizing detour of God's word around princes and palaces to land in the wilderness. Because it means that the word of God with all its creative force doesn't depend on the patterns of power that are present already. It doesn't need an army or a majority vote. It doesn't need a skyscraper or a

desk in the Oval Office.

No, it is *in the wilderness* that God is at work transforming lives, communities, the whole creation. Luke tells us that John “went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...” There are two words for repentance in the Bible. In the Hebrew scriptures, the word is *shuv*, to turn. God invites those who are going down the wrong path to turn back and take a new direction. The prophets are God’s blinking arrows, like those warning signs that tell you that you need to change lanes or take a detour, because the road you are on isn’t safe. Elijah was a prophet like this, and the people believed that, because he never died, because he was taken up into heaven in the fiery chariot, he would come again to teach the people to repent, as we heard from Malachi, to change their direction so as to be ready for the “day of the Lord.”

In the gospel story, John the Baptist prepares the people, urging them to change their ways. Christians—including Luke, who deliberately quotes the prophets in this passage—Christians see John as playing the role of Elijah, setting up a warning sign to show the people God is at work. In Luke’s story we hear the second word for repentance, *metanoia*—*meta-* as in metamorphosis, a change; and *noia* from the Greek word for mind. He wants them to let their minds be transformed, and he baptizes them to give them a symbol of renewal. Those who repent are washed clean of their sins through God’s forgiveness, but repentance, *metanoia*, isn’t something that happens to them just once. The transformation of their minds that allows them to act with goodness, justice, and love is an ongoing work where God is active and present. God continues to be at work in those who change their ways and turn to God.

God is the one who works, who changes the world. God works with us, but the work is God’s. Our job is to embrace and lift up the change that God is bringing. Luke ends our lesson with a message from Isaiah, a sign that points forward to John: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” I read this passage, and I think of construction equipment preparing the grade of a road, moving earth, cutting a level grade through the hills. But that was God’s job, not John’s. John was the voice crying out in the wilderness.

See, while emperors and kings worked on their own plans to bring a kind of peace to the world—the kind that kept them in power—and a kind of wholeness—a prosperity that enriched them and their friends—John heard God’s word calling him to the desert to urge people to be reconciled to God and to get ready for the new world that God was creating. It’s the same in our own time—governments and corporations have their own ideas of what the world should be. Our job as Christians is to call people to turn, *shuv*, from destructive and distracting dreams fashioned by the powers in media, government, and the corporate world, and to turn towards the work God is doing, towards the kingdom and a wholeness that encompasses “all flesh,” everyone—not just the well-connected, the beautiful, and the rich. Our job as Christians is to invite people to repentance, *metanoia*—to let their lives and their commitments be shaped by putting love for God and neighbor first.

And what I hear in today’s gospel is that the world-changing word of God that turns us away from destruction and toward a new future often comes in the wilderness, in the out of sight places. When you model reconciliation and forgiveness in your relationships instead of grudge-bearing, when you look for ways to lift up your neighbor first, instead of yourself, when you speak up for voiceless and forgotten

people, God is preparing the way in you.

I like to think that John took comfort from knowing that God's work did not begin or end with his preaching in the wilderness. John knew that he was part of an unfolding story of God's construction project, God's bringing the world to wholeness. In the forbidding, desolate landscape of the wilderness, the unlikeliest of places, what a comfort it must have been to John to hold onto those words he preached: "Every valley of sorrow and loss *shall be filled*, and every mountain and hill of injustice *shall be made low*, the crooked paths of exploitation and frustrated hopes for peace *shall be made straight*, and the rough ways of hardship for those who love and fear God *shall be made smooth*. And all flesh, *all of God's creatures* will see God's saving power at work." Amen.