

Preparing the Way

Luke 3:1-6

Farmville Baptist Church

December 5, 2021

Tuesday is a special day. Does anyone know what Tuesday will be? Tuesday is December 7, and December 7 is Pearl Harbor Day. It's the day when we remember the horrific and shocking attack 80 years ago on the US Naval Base in Hawaii that thrust America into World War II. 2,403 Americans were killed, along with 64 Japanese aviators and sailors, and the damage done that day ignited a bitter conflict that raged across the Pacific Ocean over three and a half years and would wreak unimaginable devastation and loss. To stand where that attack took place and remember those lost and the lives changed is sobering. Has anyone here ever been to Pearl Harbor and visited the memorials there?

The attack, which took place without a declaration of war, was judged to be a war crime, but those who planned and initiated the attack claimed it was a preventative action in the cause of peace. The Japanese government was then in the grip of an imperial military oligarchy, and the Japanese Empire was committed to what it called the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” Idealists saw it as a way to free Asian and Pacific cultures from Western colonial rule, a *serene* ~~peaceful~~ co-existence that would promote prosperity and peace. In practice, however, it was an ideology for nationalists in the Japanese government to extend their imperial rule and conquer many subject peoples. The attack on Pearl Harbor was meant to limit the ability of the United States to respond to this aggression and discourage challenges to the empire’s consolidation of control. The peace experienced by those within the sphere of influence

was not a peace anyone would want to have imposed on them; indeed, it quickly became oppression and enslavement.

This was hardly the first example of an empire imposing what it called peace on others at the point of a sword. In fact, it is reminiscent of perhaps the quintessential empire of history – Rome. For 200 years Rome ruled the Mediterranean world with an iron fist, which makes it deeply ironic that the period is known as the “pax Romana,” or Roman Peace. It was an era of order and an increase in trade under the watchful protection of Rome’s legions and navy, but it was also a time of brutal conquest and forced assimilation. No one doubted the reality of the day, whatever the imperial propaganda said.

This is perhaps most poignantly captured in a speech given by Calgacus, a Celtic chieftain who fought against the

Roman legions in Scotland. Firing up his troops, he listed the deeds of the Roman Empire in pillaging the land and conquering tribe after tribe. He summed up the Roman approach to ruling others when he said, “They rob, butcher, plunder, and call it ‘empire’; and where they make a desolation, they call it ‘peace.’”¹ Other translations render the passage, “They make a desert and they call it peace.”²

Around 50 years before Calgacus uttered those words on a Scottish hillside, it was the people of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea who felt the weight of Roman power on their shoulders. Luke takes great care to locate his account of the life of Jesus in human history, and he does so with the markers of imperial rulers at every level. We’re perhaps most familiar with this technique from the Christmas story in

¹ Tacitus, in Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 15.

² Morley, *The Roman Empire: Roots of Imperialism*, 38.

Luke 2, where we learn that Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus ~~and~~ while Quirinius was governor of Syria.³ But when we skip ahead ~~to~~^{to} chapter 3, as the infants of the Christmas stories become the prophet John and the Messiah Jesus, we find that Luke is even more meticulous in recording the names of those who are leading the political order of the day.

The first ruler named is also the most powerful: Tiberius Caesar. Successor to Augustus, Tiberius ruled the empire for 23 years, including during every event in the Gospels outside of the Christmas story itself. From far away in Rome, he cast his long shadow of power and influence over New Testament Palestine through his patronage of local rulers like the Herods and through the oversight of Roman governors like Pilate. When the peasants of Nazareth and

³ Luke 2:1-2

Capernaum thought of Rome, they thought of Tiberius; he represented the epitome of human authority in that time.

Yet Tiberius was distant; it would have been fairly easy to soften his rough edges and idealize him either as a tyrant or a savior. The next four names on the list are all a little closer to home. Pilate was a governor in Judea, the seat of Jewish ancestral identity and home to the Temple, the closest thing the Jews of the day had to a national rallying symbol. Pilate served as the direct instrument of Tiberius' imperial will. The other three names, given oversight of less politically-important regions, were client-kings, local strongmen and persons of influence who threw their lot in with the Romans. They grew wealthy and comfortable on the oppression of their fellow countrymen and women, and they maintained their unpopular rule through intimidation, bribery, and threat.

Undergirding all of this localized oppression was a Temple system that was in thrall to the political power of the day. Annas and Caiaphas, high priests from one of the wealthiest and most well-connected families in Jerusalem, were committed to Roman rule. They may have known the traditions of liberation and faithfulness that the Torah and the prophets proclaimed, but they knew where their bread was buttered: Roman rule lined their pockets and kept them in power. To that end, they – like the others mentioned in the opening to our passage – were committed to maintaining the status quo and remaining in charge, even if they had to do so through dishonest and corrupt methods.

So under Roman rule, Judea and the surrounding areas were placed at the disposal of a foreign power. They were allowed to practice their own religion – as long as it didn't remind people God wanted them to be free. They were

allowed to carry out their own laws – as long as they were in line with Rome’s priorities. They were allowed to grow their own food and pursue their own good – as long as they ~~did not~~ ^{paid} ~~pay~~ a hefty tax to Rome and ~~did~~ ^{did} whatever the Roman officials told them to do. Life wasn’t easy in Roman-controlled lands – and so it wasn’t easy for any of the disciples and followers of Jesus we meet in the New Testament. They lived under Roman ‘peace,’ but none of them would have chosen it. Rome made a desert of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, and called it peace.

But, Luke tells us, “while this may be Caesar’s world, the power of the Roman emperor, as well as his local client rulers and the temple institution, is about to meet a serious challenge.”⁴ You see, out in that desert, God was up to something. In verse 2 we read, “the word of God came to

⁴ Carroll, *Luke*, 90.

John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”⁵ Like the prophets of old, John – the boy whose birth compelled his priestly father to break out in song – John had something to say.

It was something different than what Tiberius, or Pilate or Herod or the *other* Herod or Lysanias, would proclaim. It was even different than what the high priests in their contented corruption would preach. ~~What~~ God’s word to John ~~was~~, that he then spoke to the people, was a word of something different. It was the word that his father Zechariah had foreseen all those years before. [READ Luke 1:76-79] John, this voice crying out in the wilderness of Rome’s imperial oppression, was calling on God’s people to prepare a new way, a different path in the desert: the way of the Lord.

⁵ Luke 3:2

This had been part of the preaching of an earlier prophet, the prophet Isaiah. But it wasn't unique to that prophet. All of the prophetic books look ahead to God's messenger opening a new path in the wilderness of human suffering and oppression. They use words of liberation, of freedom, for this alternative way of life: redemption, mercy, salvation. But the prophets of old recognize that this new reality, this new liberation, this new path in the desert won't look like the acts of "peace" that made the desert in the first place. The Old Testament prophet Zechariah – not John's dad – puts it this way: [READ Zechariah 9:9-10].

This image of the coming king, the hoped-for rescuer, doesn't look all that much like Tiberius...or Herod...or Pilate. He doesn't ride a warhorse, sword at his side, conquered warriors at his feet. He comes humbly, riding a donkey, taking away the weapons of war and bringing peace. It isn't

the peace of Rome and other empires, though his rule extends from sea to sea. Instead, it is the peace of God – a God who invites peace between and with people through love and mercy, not through might and power, a God who offers forgiveness instead of retribution and hope instead of despair.

This peace that the coming king will bring, this peace that the prophets like Zechariah and Isaiah proclaimed, would be at the core of John's message. That might strike us as a bit strange, because we think of John as a wild-eyed guy in the boonies who eats bugs and makes us uncomfortable with what he says and probably stinks to high-heaven. I mean, how can he not? But look at what Luke says is the core of John's message, the work that he calls people to do to prepare for the coming of the Lord – for the arrival of Jesus. "He went into all the country around the

Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”⁶

Let’s take each of these words in turn. Baptism was – and remains – a religious ritual. It wasn’t a private thing, but happened in public, within the community of the faithful. It was a conscious choice to do something, something that everyone could see. There is no such thing as a private baptism – then or now – because it meant going into the water. Jews going up to the Temple would dip into the baptismal pools as a symbol of purification or preparation, and John invites those who hear his message to take up this practice as a symbol of preparation, too.

The baptism was more specific than a general baptism of purification, though. It was a baptism of repentance. Repentance was from the Greek word meaning “turn

⁶ Luke 3:3

around” or “turn back.” This was a decision by the person responding to John’s message to turn away from the path they were on and turn towards God’s path. John would go on to talk more about repentance, something we’ll look at next week, but it starts here – because repentance, turning towards God’s path in Christ, is at the core of John’s message.

When his hearers would do that, John says, forgiveness would come. God’s forgiveness wasn’t ~~made possible~~^{created} by their baptism of repentance, but by choosing to repent, that forgiveness could take root. The things that stood between them and God would be set aside. The actions that reinforced their commitment to the way of the world would be relegated to the past. The sins that harmed others and alienated relationships could begin to be healed – not wiped

out as if they had never existed, but moved towards restoration in the way of repentance.

That's a path of peace – peace with God and, through that, peace with one another. Wrongs would be righted, slights would be forgiven, distance would be bridged, relationships would be restored. It's a path that Tiberius and Pilate, Annas and Caiaphas would have scoffed at – but it's a path that creates new life instead of a desert in our souls and in our world. It's a path that leads towards salvation instead of desolation. It's a path that opens the door to the Lord of life.

As we travel through Advent this year, we may be going through a desert in our own lives. Certainly, the past year or two has brought a great deal of uncertainty and fear, pain and heartache. We are encouraged to be estranged from one another by many in positions of power and influence,

driven apart by what we disagree on and opinions we hold that we're told are incompatible with being together. We suffer from illness, from loss, from hurts received...and we've probably given out a few hurts, too. We live in a world, in a community, maybe even in families where deserts and wildernesses have been made...and we're tempted to call them "peace."

No more.

Today, we hear of the arrival of John. We hear his voice crying in the wilderness. We hear his invitation to choose the path of repentance, to seek forgiveness. And as we step onto that path, together, we find that we are preparing for something incredible, something wonderful – a new kind of peace, a Jesus kind of peace. This Advent, let us look forward with great anticipation to another way – the way of Christ. And let us take action this Advent season, preparing

the way for Jesus through acts of repentance and forgiveness, seeking the mercy of God for us and increasing our knowledge of the salvation our Lord brings. Let us hear John and prepare the way so God may guide our feet into the path of peace. Let us pray.