

**In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— 2 during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:**

**“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
 ‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
 make straight paths for him.  
 5 Every valley shall be filled in,  
 every mountain and hill made low.  
 The crooked roads shall become straight,  
 the rough ways smooth.  
 6 And all people will see God’s salvation.”**

We begin today’s reading with a political history of sorts, as Luke lists who the specific rulers were when John entered his public ministry. What does it matter? Well, first of all, this shows us that the stories of the Bible are truly historical. These aren’t made up stories that take place in “a land far far away.” God focuses our eyes to a real time and a real place for a very real story of our salvation.

And that affects our view of religion too. Visions are interesting, but they are meant to point us to the real world and the real God. God doesn’t want us to escape this world through fantasy. He gave us an escape in reality. He deals with us no matter where we are: in deserts, valleys, hills and wildernesses.

We see real life politicians who ruled during John’s time. They were not good people. Tiberius Caesar was the adopted son of Caesar Augustus, the one who issued the decree that the entire Roman world should be taxed, who died in 14 A.D. Tiberius subsequently ruled over the Roman Empire from 14-37 A.D. If John came on the scene in his fifteenth year, it would have been about 29 A.D. then. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, during the last decade of Tiberius’ life, from 27 A.D. on, things went bad.

It is the remaining decade or so of Tiberius’s life that has given rise to the legend of Tiberius the monster. It seems probable, to begin with, that Tiberius, never handsome, had become repulsively ugly. First his skin broke out in blotches, and then his complexion became covered with pus-filled eruptions, exuding a bad smell and causing a good deal of pain. He built himself a dozen villas with prisons, underground dungeons, torture chambers, and places of execution. If the near-contemporary historians are to be believed, his favourite entertainments were cruel and obscene. Even under the most favourable interpretation, he killed ferociously and almost at random. It is probable that by then his mind was disordered.

Then we shift our gaze the tetrarchs, who were rulers of different divisions of Israel. Herod and Philip were both sons of Herod the Great, the one who butchered the infants of Bethlehem and killed some of his own children and wives, if my memory serves me correctly. They often say, “like father, like son.” Herod ended up

being the one who had John the Baptist beheaded when John called him to repent for taking his brother Philip's wife from him.

As we look at the secular governor of Judea we find Pontius Pilate, who later allowed Jesus to be whipped and crucified, even though he found nothing wrong with him. According to history, Pilate was later deposed from Judea because of his cruelty to the Jews. Annas and Caiaphas were also on the scene at Jesus' crucifixion. Even though they were both high priests and should have known that Jesus was the Messiah, they both wanted nothing to do with Him either.

So again, why the history lesson here? It always seems strange that John began his ministry in the wilderness. Why not go to the towns and epicenters? Think about this. Perhaps he was going to the people who were trying to escape. It wasn't uncommon for religious people to try and live separate lives at that time, people such as the Essenes. So what does John do? He goes to them and starts reaching out to them, the people who realized what a mess of a world they were living in and who wanted to escape.

You know, before we go any further, is that something that you desire from time to time? I mean, you peruse Facebook and you see what some people post. It makes you angry. You want to say something, but when you do you get attacked in return. You say to yourself, "I'm done. I don't want any part of this online society any more. It just makes me angry." You deal with angry people at work or driving by you in a hurry to get who knows where. You see pictures of cabins out in the woods and you say to yourself, "Oh, how I would love to just leave it all behind and move up north." You hear about the issues your church is having and you say to yourself, "I don't want to deal with this any more. I'll just read my Bible at home." You listen to the politicians and you see the way the government is spending us into oblivion. You watch the news and see some of the crimes that people are committing. It's worrisome. It's scary. A part of you may want to sell all you have and simplify your life as much as possible. "Beam me up, Scotty!" Some people do just that. The check out and move out to as remote of a place as possible.

This is where John started his ministry. **He went into all the country around the Jordan.** Here are all the people who want to be recluses, and here comes the greatest recluse of all. He hadn't ever had his hair cut. He never drank wine or fermented drink. He was born to be raised a Nazarite. The recluse was going to the recluses. We have people like that yet today - people that talk all about doomsday and the one world order. They have all kinds of advice! "Buy dry rations of food! Stock up on the guns. Build a bomb shelter! The Russians are coming!" But what did John have to say to them? John came "**preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**" Isn't that interesting if you think about it? He didn't come to them to commiserate with them and complain about what a terrible world they lived in. He didn't give them five steps to surviving in the wilderness. He told them to repent too. They really weren't any better than any of the others in the world.

When we want to run away from the world as we are disgusted by the sins and troubles of our society, it might be easy to get a holier than thou attitude about the world. It might be easy to think that we have to build a fortress in our homes to survive the apocalypse. John, who spoke of the axe coming to the foot of the tree, doesn't let us get away with that. He says, "Come out for your fortress. Quit hiding. Repent." What does

repentance mean? It means a change of mind. That change starts with the way I think about myself. God didn't plant me here just to point the fingers at others. He didn't put humanity on earth to try and hide from each other or from God. I can point the finger all I want at the evils of society, and there are plenty - no doubt about it. But John seeks me out and points the finger at me. He comes out to the desert for me. He doesn't let me hide. He finds me and tells me to repent of my sins too.

We can be full of arrogance over how good we are compared to others. We can also have a loveless attitude that doesn't want to reach out to this world of sinners who are on the pathway to hell. How loving is that? Was that the attitude of our God? Advent shows us a God who willingly CAME here in order to save us. He mingled with us. Spoke with us. Told us about God's mercy. Died in our sins. He didn't come just to point the finger at us. He came to have the finger pointed at Himself, for ME and for YOU. So who am I to think that I am somehow better than my society, that I can somehow hide from it all and be held innocent for assigning myself to a cocoon? It doesn't work that way.

John came to call all people to repentance. That's us too. You could understand this in the terms of what Isaiah prophesied in chapter 40.

**Every valley shall be filled in,  
every mountain and hill made low.  
The crooked roads shall become straight,  
the rough ways smooth.**

The mountains and hills of pride will be made low. On the other side of the spectrum, those who are down in the valleys of life - who are filled with despair - they will be filled in. All are put on the same level - the same playing field. John climbed the mountains with a hatchet of God's law to bring down the mighty from their thrones. He also came to those who had despaired of the future to fill them with peace and hope!

How so? Through a **baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**. After all God says I've done, after all of the hell and wrath that He has said I deserved for my sins, when I have seriously hurt people by what I've said and done, could it really be so simple? Just a splash and a dash of water, and I'm forgiven? That's it? All my sins are washed away, and I don't have to suffer one bit? How could that be?

It doesn't make sense until Jesus comes and steps in the water. Then we see what the water is for. He stepped into the water to take the place of you and me. He stepped into the water to be anointed with our sin and our death and our hell. The Holy Spirit landed on Him and led Him to make the payment for my sins. So when Jesus walked into the waters of baptism, He was walking in to go on a journey of death at the cross. That way, when I was brought to the waters of baptism, I was promised that I was walking into His life. Paul explains in Romans 6,

**Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4  
We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was  
raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.**

After Paul had persecuted Christians and even put them to death, Jesus confronted him and said, "Why are you persecuting me?" But Paul was offered a way out from the punishment he deserved. In a little house on Straight Street, with a little bit of water, Ananias baptized him and washed his sins away in the blood of Christ.

A simple washing of water with a promise of forgiveness for him and for us. So much more pain and suffering for Jesus. Without Jesus, this water would do nothing. But with Jesus, this water does everything. It makes you and me, the high and the low, the crooked and the rough, all the same. We're all covered in the same blood, through the same baptism, through the same faith.

You might compare it to a credit card. My children have a credit card to fill up with gas and for emergencies. The credit card gives them credit to buy what they need. But when look at the credit card, it causes me work and payment. The bill adds up, and at the end of the month I pay it. The same could be true of baptism. It gives us forgiveness free of charge. It gave Jesus suffering and death, as He went on to earn our forgiveness, having been anointed to die, once for all, sins past, present and future.

John didn't have an army. He didn't have the Pharisees or the Sadducees behind him. He didn't have a church or a pulpit. He had the Word and some water. He showed them a God of mercy, who would seek them in the desert, who would wash them clean with simple water and the Word. The Holy Spirit worked faith in them. They believed and they were baptized. Their sins were washed away. They could have peace, for they were prepared for Jesus to come.

The theme of this Sunday in Advent is peace. Peace was hard to find in Jerusalem and Judah, especially with all of the evil rulers that were on the scene at the time. Then John showed up in camel's hair, and offered them a peace that they couldn't find in the wilderness. He offered them a peace in Jesus and in baptism and the forgiveness of sins. They didn't have to run and hide, for the Messiah would give them a perfect place to hide.

I just watched part of President Bush's funeral this week, and I saw four different presidents sitting next to each other. What a variety of personalities and leaders who led us through some interesting years in the past and some dangerous times. While trying to do what they thought best, some led us into war. Others led us into sin. Who knows what will be in the future? It can be scary to think about what will happen. Some want to move to Canada, and others to Alaska. There's no peace in the wilderness. But John comes to you and offers you a different peace in your baptism and in Jesus: the peace of knowing your sins are forgiven and your Savior is coming for you. Be at peace in Him as you wait for Him to come again. Amen.