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Advent 2 – Luke 3:1-6 – John’s Advent Gospel

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Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanius, Annas, Caiaphas – that’s a pretty serious list of fat-cats in the land of Israel! Tiberius Caesar was the most powerful man on earth, the emperor of perhaps the greatest, largest, and most glorious empire this world has ever known. Pontius Pilate is a name that you probably recognize; he was the Roman governor who ruled during this time over Jerusalem and Judea, the very heart of the land of Israel. Herod and Philip were brothers, sons of the man history has dubbed Herod the Great. They came from a famous and powerful and influential ruling family, and they each ruled over a quarter of the land as tetrarchs. Then finally, Lysanius was the man who ruled over the last quarter of the land of the Jews, way to the north in a part of the country called Abilene.

But as great as those government officials were, to the Jews, Annas and Caiaphas were even greater. They were the highest-ranking religious officials in all of Judea. Annas was the one whom the Israelite people considered to be the true high priest and was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was the acting high priest at the time by official appointment of Rome. *That* was a high-powered family to the people of Judea, and as far as they were concerned, those two were the top dogs around.

But isn’t it funny sometimes how God brings into focus what’s really important? It’s like Luke runs down this A-list of what seemed like all the big names in Israel at the time, and then says ya, ya, ya, those guys were great, but here’s what you really need to know: “*the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.*” That’s just not the way this world works, is it? All those people with all that fame and fortune – those are the ones who have influence and power; those are the ones people actually listen to. But God doesn’t work the way we work, and if you look at it with your eyes of faith, you can understand why.

For the most part, John was just a regular guy, nothing special about him, nothing to draw you to him – but God chose him for a special purpose and sent him with the highest authority. What was special about John wasn’t himself – it was the message he proclaimed, because it was God’s message to a people who were yearning and dying to hear it. The message John had to proclaim was very different from what any of the famous and powerful people might have said in his day, but you can bet it went farther, lasted longer, and meant a whole lot more to those whose hearts it touched. The message John proclaimed was a special Advent Gospel that still resonates even today. John brought word of a gracious God who offered to believers free forgiveness and salvation in holy baptism, and he heralded the Good News of the Savior’s coming: prepare the way for the Lord!

You know, in days gone by, it was common practice whenever a king or ruler would travel around his land for a herald to go ahead of him to announce his coming. This could be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on the people and depending on the ruler. If the ruler was a cruel tyrant, the people had to be afraid about what their ruler would see and say when he came through, no matter what they might do to get ready for him. But if he was kind and good, the people could look forward to his coming, and know that it would be a blessing to them – something they could all celebrate together!

And *that’s* exactly the reason the Word of God came to John in the desert – God wanted John to proclaim his special advent Gospel to all the people of Israel so they could prepare their hearts and know that their Savior-King was coming soon. And God didn’t send his herald empty-handed, either – he sent him with a token of God’s grace that was meant to be shared with everyone who would listen. “[*John*] went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

Now of course, such a gracious, powerful gift from such a gracious, powerful God tells us something about ourselves, doesn’t it? It tells us how much we desperately need it, and who can deny that? John came with a warning for everyone whose lives are unprepared for their King’s coming. Repent, he said; confess your sins and acknowledge your King in your hearts and by your actions before it’s too late.

I mean, think about it. When your king comes, would you want the things of this world to be sitting on the throne of your hearts that rightly belongs only to God? For us, this holiday season makes it so very easy to worry more about presents and parties and decorations than about remembering the coming of our Savior. How long did your thankfulness for what you have last after Thanksgiving before you turned your attention instead to all the *new* things you want for Christmas? If you’re like me, it wasn’t very long. As Christmas approaches, are you looking forward to playing with all your new toys more than celebrating your Savior’s birth? Are you so backed up from buying gifts that you don’t have a gift for God? Lots of people here were willing to make a long, hard trip of 20 miles or more on foot out to the desert just to hear John preach – would we make the same sacrifice to be fed with God’s Word?

I think we all know our answers to those questions, all too often. Our hearts are bent and broken, rough and rutted by sin. But friends, that’s exactly why we needed John’s Advent Gospel, because that’s *God’s* answer to our sin – the gracious gift from our gracious Lord of a baptism for our forgiveness.

See, God knew that our sinful hearts are hopelessly crooked and unprepared for his coming. We could never receive him properly on our own, with the kind of honor and welcome he deserves. But thank God, he himself *makes* us ready for his coming by straightening us out and readying our hearts for us; that's exactly what he does for us in holy baptism.

In baptism God washes away our sins and works faith inside of us; he makes us his very own people and takes the throne in our hearts that is rightly his. And that's something the devil can never take away from us, no matter how many times we fall into temptation. Our King has come to us to save us, and our baptism is undeniable proof that we are his children and our hearts belong to him and no one else. That's our motivation to live in repentance and our comfort for when we fail.

And in that light, the message John proclaimed takes on a whole new meaning for us: Prepare the way for the Lord! A big part of the job of a herald who would run ahead of a traveling ruler would be to ready the people and the road for his coming to make his trip as smooth as possible – both literally and figuratively. And our text says that in a certain sense, John came for that same purpose. It's just that John came as no ordinary herald of no ordinary earthly king, and so his message took on a very different tone for God's people. God's specially appointed messenger came with joy and excitement and urgency, because he foretold the coming of the Prince of Peace with healing and salvation that we certainly wouldn't want to miss.

This was John's Advent Gospel to baptized and forgiven children of God: "*A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.'*" That sounds like a really major undertaking, doesn't it? Even now flattening mountains and filling valleys takes an awful lot of work, and it took so much more back in those days. But friends, that's exactly the point – the grand scale of this transformation project is matched only by the grandeur of the heavenly King who's coming on it to meet us.

But here's the thing – this doesn't mean that we should call up the local construction company and rent some land movers. This is talking about making our hearts ready for Christ's coming. John is telling us to remove every sinful obstruction and obstacle in our lives that could hinder our spiritual relationship with Jesus. Get rid of that pride and stubbornness and entitlement and worldliness, John says, because your King is coming, and he wants and deserves better from us. And until he comes, this spiritual road construction project is kind of like road construction in the Midwest – it's indefinitely ongoing and never finished. God has made us his people by faith through baptism, and until we meet him face-

to-face, we constantly keep working and striving to bring our lives in line with that high calling.

But don't let that worry you, because that coming is actually something for us to look forward to every day. I mean, remember John's Advent Gospel: Christ sent his messenger ahead of him with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of our sins by which God made us his people and adopted us as his own children. That means he's not coming to inspect us or interrogate us about our spiritual shortcomings. He's not looking for our faults, because he's already washed them away forever! No, your King is coming to bring you the salvation you've so eagerly awaited, to delight in your living faith, and in the sight of all mankind, to gather you to himself in your eternal home in heaven with all the rest of God's family forevermore. So friends, look forward to your Savior's coming with active readiness and loving anticipation, because then you *will* welcome him with the honor he deserves.

There's one last thing I want to draw your attention to about this passage, because it makes so clear why this messenger John takes such a prominent place in history when all of the other big shots we talked about fade into the background. The prophecy at the end of our text says, "*All mankind will see God's salvation,*" but in the original Old Testament Hebrew those last words were, "*All mankind will see the LORD's glory.*" There wasn't much that seemed glorious about a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger. There wasn't much that seemed glorious about a man beaten and bloodied and dying on a cross. There wasn't much that seemed glorious about Jesus the first time he came. But make no mistake, John's Advent Gospel proclaimed the coming of a glorious King. He was just a very different and much greater kind of king than the ones we normally think of. He was a King whose glory wasn't in his political power. He was a King whose glory was in his grace and salvation. John's Advent Gospel tells us of that Savior-King, and it tells us of the King of Kings who is coming again to take us into his heavenly Kingdom. So people of God, this Advent season, heed the messenger's call: "Your Lord, your King, your Savior is coming; prepare the way!" Amen.