

To Seek and To Save the Lost

The Ministry of John the Baptist

Luke 3:1-6

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John's Baptism

Scripture

The first two chapters of Luke's Gospel deal with the birth narratives of John the Baptist and his relative, Jesus Christ. Throughout these two chapters Luke has intentionally set John and Jesus side by side each other.

As chapter 3 of Luke's Gospel opens, Luke continued to set John and Jesus side by side as he described the beginning of their public ministries. And except for one brief incident about John in Luke 7:18-23, he disappears from Luke's Gospel after chapter 3. The reason is that Luke wanted to focus exclusively on the person and work of Jesus from chapter 4 onwards. However, in chapter 3 John and Jesus are still connected together as they each began their public ministries.

For thirty years John and Jesus had lived in private, out of the public eye. John lived "in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel" (1:80). And after his brief public appearance at the age of twelve at the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus lived in the small, isolated village of Nazareth, where he "was submissive" to his parents (2:51).

Very few people at that time knew the true identities of John or Jesus. And of those few, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna, and Joseph, had most likely already died.

The angels who had announced the births of John and Jesus to so many different individuals had long since gone to heaven. But the thirty years of silence was about to end. And the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist would end an even longer period of silence—the four hundred years since God last spoke to his people through the prophet Malachi (in about 430 BC). God promised to send a deliverer (called the Messiah) who would come to rescue his people (Malachi 3:1). Moreover, God also promised that he would send a Messenger

who would prepare the way for the Messiah. Jesus, of course, was the Messiah, and John was the Messenger.

It is important to keep in mind that as John and Jesus were about to begin their ministries, Israel was suffering under political and spiritual oppression. God's covenant people were under the repressive political and military rule of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, Israel's spiritual leaders were corrupt and wicked. There was widespread biblical ignorance and apostasy. The people longed for political and military freedom, which they hoped that God's Messiah would bring them.

It was in this setting that the Messenger, John, the first prophet in more than four hundred years, appeared to introduce the Messiah, Jesus. John's task was to prepare the people for the Messiah, and also to present the Messiah to the people.

Let's read about the ministry of John the Baptist in Luke 3:1-6:

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

**‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.**

**⁵Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall become straight,
and the rough places shall become level ways,**

**⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of
God.’” (Luke 3:1-6)**

Introduction

Peter Cartwright was a famous nineteenth century Methodist evangelist in this country who personally baptized twelve thousand converts during his ministry.¹ He was well known for his powerful, fiery, and uncompromising preaching.

The story is told that one day the President of the United States, Andrew Jackson, came to hear Cartwright preach. He was told before the service not to offend the President by saying anything out of line. So, when Cartwright got up to preach, the first words out of his mouth were, "I understand that President Andrew Jackson is here this morning. I have been requested to be very guarded in my remarks. Let me say this: Andrew Jackson will go to hell if does not repent of his sin!"

The entire congregation gasped with shock at Cartwright's boldness. How could this young preacher dare to confront the President in public, they wondered. After the service, when Andrew Jackson met the preacher he looked at him in the eye and said, "Sir, if I had a regiment of men like you, I could conquer the world!"²

Like Peter Cartwright, John the Baptist was not afraid to confront people with the truth. As one commentator said of John, "Here was a man who cared enough to confront!"³

Lesson

In today's lesson I want to examine the ministry of John the Baptist in Luke 3:1-6.

An examination of the ministry of John the Baptist will

¹ See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Cartwright_\(revivalist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Cartwright_(revivalist)).

² See http://msgboard.snopes.com/message/ultimatebb.php?ubb/get_topic/f/82/t/000138.html.

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Volume 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R Publishing, 2009), 115.

show us what constitutes a faithful ministry.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Context of a Faithful Ministry (3:1-2a)
2. The Call to a Faithful Ministry (2:2b)
3. The Purpose of a Faithful Ministry (3:3)
4. The Significance of a Faithful Ministry (3:4-6)

I. The Context of a Faithful Ministry (3:1-2a)

First, let's look at the context of a faithful ministry.

Luke began chapter 3 by listing seven leaders—five political and two spiritual—in providing us the historical context for the faithful ministry of John the Baptist.

Luke said that John began his faithful ministry **in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar** (3:1a). **Tiberius Caesar** was the successor of Caesar Augustus. Luke mentioned Caesar Augustus when he wrote about the decree “that all the world should be registered” in Luke 2:1, which sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem where Mary gave birth to Jesus (2:7).

In 11 AD **Tiberius** became co-emperor with Augustus. When Augustus died on August 19, 14 AD, **Tiberius** became the sole emperor. Some say that **the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar** would therefore mean that John began his ministry in 29 AD.

However, others say that **the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar** should be dated from 11 AD, when he began ruling as a co-emperor. In that case, John would have started his ministry in 26 AD.

While it is impossible to be dogmatic, I am inclined to hold to the view that John began his ministry in 26 AD, for the following reasons, which I have gleaned from John MacArthur.

First, in verse 2a Luke said that Annas and Caiaphas ruled as high priests together. It seems that he intended to link the co-regency of Augustus and **Tiberius** together as well, with the

start of Tiberius' reign thus beginning in 11 AD and not 14 AD. That, then, would mark the start of John's ministry in 26 AD.

Second, according to the first-century historian Josephus, Herod the Great began building the temple in 19 BC. In John 2:20, the Jewish leaders said to Jesus, who was in Jerusalem for the Passover at the time, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple." That would make 27 AD the date of that Passover, which in turn places the beginning of Jesus' ministry earlier in 27 AD or late 26 AD. John began his public ministry a few months earlier, also in 26 AD.

And third, according to Luke 3:23, "Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age." Since he was born shortly before the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, Jesus would have been about thirty years old in 26 AD.⁴

Moving on, **Pontius Pilate** was the fifth **governor of Judea** (3:1b). Tiberius appointed him as **governor** in 26 AD, the same year that John began his ministry. **Pilate**, before whom Jesus appeared on the day of his crucifixion, is described as proud, arrogant, and cynical, and also as weak and vacillating.

Next, Luke mentioned **Herod**, the **tetrarch of Galilee** (3:1c). **Herod** was one of the six sons of Herod the Great. The **Herod** mentioned in this verse is **Herod Antipas**, who ruled **Galilee** after the death of his father, Herod the Great, from 4 BC until 39 AD. He is also the **Herod** that is referred to in the rest of the Gospel accounts during the ministries of John and Jesus. He imprisoned John (3:20) and had him executed (9:9). And he also played a role in the kangaroo trial of Jesus (23:7-12).

Then Luke mentioned Herod's **brother Philip**, the **tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis** (3:1d), which is northeast of Galilee. He ruled from 4 BC to 34 AD.

Not much is known of **Lysanias**, the **tetrarch of Abilene** (3:1e). For centuries liberal scholars used to say that Luke

⁴ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Luke 1-5*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 201.

made an historical error, because the only Lysanias known in history died in 36 BC, more than 60 years before John started his ministry. Recently, however, inscriptions have been found that indicate that another **Lysanias**, perhaps the son of the older Lysanias, ruled during the reign of Tiberius as the **tetrarch of Abilene**. So, once again Luke has proven himself to be an accurate historian!

Finally, Luke said that John began his ministry **during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas** (3:2a). There never at any time were two high priests ruling at the same time. So why does Luke mention both **Annas** and **Caiaphas**?

In those days, the high priest was both the civil and the religious leader of the community. Previously, the office of high priest had been hereditary and for life. But with the coming of the Romans the office was the object of all kinds of intrigue. The result was that between 37 BC and 26 AD, a span of sixty-three years, there were no fewer than twenty-eight different high priests! Now **Annas** was actually high priest from 6 to 15 AD. Therefore, he was out of office in 26 AD, but he was succeeded by no fewer than four of his sons, and **Caiaphas** was his son-in-law. So, although **Caiaphas** was the reigning high priest, **Annas** was the real power behind the throne. That is in fact why Jesus was first brought to him after his arrest (John 18:13) although he was not in office. Luke associates **Annas** with **Caiaphas** because, although **Caiaphas** was the actual high priest, **Annas** was still the most influential priestly figure in the land.

More than providing an accurate, historical context for the ministry of John the Baptist, Luke wanted us to understand the political and spiritual conditions when John began his ministry. To most observers they might have looked bleak and dismal. How could anyone hope to minister in such a difficult context? But God sent John to minister in exactly that context.

Every faithful minister is also set apart to minister in a specific historical and cultural context. Whether in America or

Angola or Afghanistan, a faithful minister serves in the context in which God places him.

II. The Call to a Faithful Ministry (3:2b)

Second, notice the call to a faithful ministry.

The mighty Roman Empire ruled the world in utter rebellion against God, and the corrupt spiritual leaders of Israel misled the covenant people of God by their misguided teaching.

For more than four hundred years God had been silent. During that time there had not been a true prophet of God.

But then one day **the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness** (3:2b). John received a call from God to a ministry of preaching and baptizing. Although the Bible does not tell us how **the word of God came to John**, he nevertheless discerned in his heart that God had called him to ministry.

We learn from this that every faithful minister of the Gospel must receive an *inward call* from God prior to the start of his ministry. He must have an inward conviction that God has called him to ministry.

In addition, every faithful minister of the Gospel must also receive an *outward call* from man. People must affirm his gifts, abilities, and potential for usefulness. Only then is he ready to serve as a faithful minister.

My own inward call came while as a student at the University of Cape Town. I read a book about the life of the martyr Jim Elliot, who said that every Christian ought to be a missionary. God used that statement in my life, as I believed that I should give myself to vocational ministry. Over the next several months that thought just became stronger and stronger in my heart. That was my inward sense of God's call to me.

The outward call came when I went to my church pastor and my campus pastor and asked them what they thought I

should do. They both encouraged me to seek theological training and pursue a call to vocational ministry.

A few years later I came to the United States to study theology. After graduating from seminary I received a call to pastoral ministry, and I have been serving God ever since.

John models for us a call to ministry. Every faithful minister must receive an inward call from God to serve him.

III. The Purpose of a Faithful Ministry (3:3)

Third, look at the purpose of a faithful ministry.

Luke said that after receiving his call to ministry, John **went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (3:3).**

It is helpful to keep in mind that John's **baptism** is not the same as Christian baptism. Christian baptism was inaugurated only after Jesus' death and resurrection.

John knew that in order to be reconciled to God people needed to have their sins forgiven. And in order to receive **the forgiveness of sins** people needed to repent. That is, people needed to stop sinning. They could not receive **the forgiveness of sins** while fully intending to carry on in their sinful ways. No. There needed to be a complete abandonment of all that was wrong and sinful.

When people expressed their wholehearted desire to abandon all their sin and wickedness, they were then baptized as a sign of their sincere desire to turn away from all their sin.

Ultimately, John's preaching and baptism pointed to the coming Messiah who was the one through whom **forgiveness of sins** would come. In other words, John's faithful ministry pointed people to Jesus who alone forgives sin.

Similarly, the purpose of all faithful ministry today is to point people to Jesus. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to God the Father except through Jesus.

Faithful ministers must proclaim the good news of the gospel that is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

IV. The Significance of a Faithful Ministry (3:4-6)

And finally, observe the significance of a faithful ministry.

In the ancient world it was customary for kings to receive a royal welcome. So “when an emperor or some other eminent personage was about to visit a city, the citizens could be required to prepare a well-constructed approach-road along which he could advance with due pomp and dignity on his way into the city.”⁵ And to make sure that the people were ready to receive him, the king would send a messenger ahead to announce the news of his coming.

About seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah took this custom and turned it into a prophecy. One day a great king would come to God’s people, and when he did come, a messenger would go ahead and announce the news of his coming.

Luke then took Isaiah’s prophecy and applied it to the coming of king Jesus. The messenger who would go ahead and announce the news of his coming was John the Baptist. He said: **“As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘The voice of one crying 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 become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”**”

Luke did not mean that people needed now to make physical preparation for **the way of the Lord**. Rather, people needed to make spiritual preparation.

⁵ David Gooding, *According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 73.

John, of course, had a unique role in preparing **the way of the Lord**. No one else did that in the way that John did.

Nevertheless, the significance of a faithful ministry like John's is that **all flesh shall see the salvation of God** (3:6). This does not mean "that God will save every single individual of the human race, even those who willfully reject him; such a doctrine runs counter to the basic teaching of the New Testament. Rather, it means that there is no kind of person the gospel cannot reach, no boundary it cannot cross. Luke is not saying that everyone will be saved, but that anyone can be saved."⁶ And the way people are saved is by trusting in the Messiah whom God has sent into the world, and to whom every faithful minister points.

Conclusion

John the Baptist was a faithful minister. He served in a difficult historical context. He was clearly called by the word of God. He pointed people to Jesus. And he called all kinds of people to salvation in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray that God will raise up men who will be faithful ministers of this kind. Amen.

⁶ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Luke*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 17.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

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develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father in heaven, we live in a day of cultural and spiritual rot, not unlike the time when John the Baptist began his ministry.

We learn from Luke that John was faithful in a difficult ministry context. He also experienced a definite inward call to ministry. He pointed people to Jesus. And he ministered to all kinds of people.

O God, will you raise up faithful ministers of this kind today?

And for all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!