

The Road to the Wilderness

[Malachi 3:1-4](#), [Luke 1:68-79](#), [Luke 3:1-6](#)

When we look at today's scripture lesson, particularly the passage from Luke 3, it seems there is a lot of extra information given. Have you ever experienced a discussion with someone where clearly they were giving you way too much information? Much of it is stuff you just didn't want to hear! Other times, maybe you were on a need-to-know basis where you are literally kept in the dark over some details that usually turned out to be important for you to be able to function. But today's scripture seems packed at the beginning with a lot of extra stuff.

One thing I've learned as I study the Bible is the fact that everything is included in the scriptures for a reason. For Luke, he was appropriately dating the events of the time by placing those events within the timeline of the emperors and the leaders of the church. Luke tells us it was the 15th year for Emperor

Tiberius and that Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was ruler of Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler of Abilene. If that doesn't accurately date the passage I don't know what would. We are given a clear picture of who was in power in the Roman Empire at the time of John the Baptist. We are painted a murky picture of the mountain known as the Roman government.

On the other side, we are given a glimpse of the mountain of the church during this time. There was corruption abounding throughout the Temple system, where the poor were being charged taxes and fees on top of the taxes just to follow the laws of Israel and conduct the appropriate sacrifices. We are given the pillars of Annas and Caiaphas as the high priests at the time, overseeing and approving of this corrupt system. For some, the mountain of the church was insurmountable.

So the stage was set among the mountain of the oppressive Roman government and the mountain of the corrupt Temple system. And it was here where we find John the Baptist. He was not dwelling on the mountain but was called out to the wilderness. John was literally prophesying as the voice crying out in the wilderness.

Several years ago, when special events would come into town, barkers would be called on to promote the circus or whatever the event was. Their job would be to provide just enough information to entice people to come to the show. They couldn't be overly spectacular or they would overshadow the show and people would see it as a disappointment. They also couldn't be too boring or no one would be interested enough to attend the show. So they had to provide the right amount of information and fervor to raise people's curiosity just enough to

want to come and see the show and not be disappointed once they did.

So we have John the Baptist, a holy man in every sense of the term, not lingering in the mountain of the Roman Empire and not lingering in the mountain of the Temple system. John was calling people out to the wilderness. The wilderness was significant for people in John's time. There are numerous references to the wilderness where the Israelites wandered for forty years before crossing into the Promised Land. It seems like a long time to stay lost! During that time the Israelites spent a lot of time grumbling and complaining. They also spent a lot of time refining their faith. When you review the scriptures that look back on the time in the wilderness, it is looked at as an ideal time when God's people were totally dependent on God for all their needs, and God provided for all their needs. God was in

communion with God's people. It was a time of repentance; a time of humbling oneself to God. And ultimately, it was a time of receiving tremendous blessings from God.

So we find John the Baptist, going out into the wilderness, and calling everyone out to him to repent of their sin and be baptized by water as a symbol of that repentance. Repent comes from a root word in Hebrew that means to turn around. It means to literally change direction. John was calling people out into the wilderness to rededicate their lives to God. He was calling people away from the oppression of the Roman government. He was calling people away from the corruption of the Temple system. John was reminding the people of the importance of putting God first in their lives.

John had a secondary mission as well. Malachi 3:1 says, "See I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me."

John was fulfilling the role of the old-time barker, preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. He was serving in the role as the voice crying in the wilderness. It was time to get people's attention. It was time to get people to realize that they were falling asleep when they should be watching and waiting for the Messiah.

What about us today? Are we preparing for the coming of the Messiah? Through the season of Advent we look forward to the celebration of the birth of Jesus so we prepare for Christmas, with all the trimmings. But are we preparing for Jesus' return, when we will be called together to meet him in heaven? Many have difficulty with the concept of Jesus' return. Yet we know that at some time Jesus will return to gather his faithful followers to him in paradise. Are we watching and waiting for the Messiah?

If we are watching and waiting for the return of Jesus, what are we doing in the meantime? Let me ask you this – are we simply waiting for Christmas to arrive this year? Probably not. There is a lot of preparation that is going on. Take a look at our sanctuary. We gathered together 2 weeks ago to decorate for the season. Some of you have probably prepared your homes as well, with decorations and plans for cookie-baking and a big dinner. We are shopping for presents and yes, giving to charities that seem to pop up more during this time than any other. We are actively preparing for the coming of Christmas.

In the busyness of the season, let us take time to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Messiah. Let us take time to remember those who are struggling this year. I want to again take the time to thank each of you for your support of each of the programs for those in need. We are supporting Samaritan's

Purse, SERRV, the Ronald McDonald house, the military with donations of personal care supplies, the Asbury home with over 235 gifts, and many others. We are enacting the will of God to care for those in need and to share the gospel at every opportunity. Let us remember to take time to prepare our hearts as well. Let us make time to commune with God and seek God's guidance for us as individuals and as a congregation.

I like the message of the prophet Isaiah as retold in our scripture lesson from Luke chapter 3 which says, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight. Every valley shall be filled (lifted up) 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.'

What a beautiful set of images. There will be no more blind curves in our path of life. Our mountain trails will be made low

and leveled out. Our valley experiences will be lifted up. The crooked ways will all straighten out and the rough paths in our lives will be smooth. That sounds like paradise to me. A time of no more sorrow, no more death, no more tears. It sounds very much like the song we sang on All Saints Sunday. Through our tears and pain of remembering our lost loved ones, we sang out with joy, “Soon and very soon we are going to see the king! Hallelujah, Hallelujah, we are going to see the king!” We wait for the coming of the Messiah with joy and thanksgiving as we prepare the way of the Lord. Amen.