

**Engage Bible Study: Luke 3:1-22**  
**October 10-12, 2011**

In the first two chapters of his gospel Luke paints a beautiful picture of God at work in surprising and wonderful ways. The remarkable births of both John and Jesus have been building a level of expectation in the reader for what God is going to do. And now in chapter three Luke unveils more of God-at-work...because ultimately that's what the gospel is – God-at-work.

In Mark's gospel John preaches, baptizes, is imprisoned, and Jesus is baptized, tempted and starts his public ministry within the first 14 verses. Mark wastes no time. But that isn't Luke's style. For Luke significant events require prelude and preparation and so Luke takes 134 verses to prepare us for the ministries of John and Jesus. And to some extent this pattern of Luke of the necessity of prelude and preparation are reflected in the worship life of the Church. Our two primary celebrations, Easter and Christmas, are preceded by weeks of prelude and preparation called Lent and Advent.

***The political and religious backdrop (3:1-6)***

Let's dive right in by reading 3:1-6 [READ]. By now this should be a familiar pattern...Luke setting the story of Jesus within the historical and political context. As I've mentioned before Luke does this because for Luke Jesus has political implications. But Luke is also anticipating his second volume, Acts, and the political and religious arenas through which the gospel will travel as the movement grows. As the gospel expands from Jerusalem to Rome not only will it encounter the poor, the lame and the blind, it will also confront high priests, imperial guards, governors and kings.

Let's take a moment to get to know the individuals that Luke mentions in these first few verses because they will be a part of the force that will oppose what God is doing in Jesus, and will be a partner in sending the Son of God to the cross. **Tiberius Caesar** is the lord and savior of the Roman Empire. "Caesar" is a title, a synonym for king, while Tiberius is the name of that particular Caesar. The fifteenth year of Tiberius's reign would date this part of the story at 28-29 CE. **Pontius Pilate** was technically not governor but procurator of Judea from 26-36. Judea is the southern part of Palestine. Pilate's job was to keep the peace and collect taxes for Rome. Next, three tetrarchs are named. A tetrarchy was one-fourth of a region. Herod the Great had divided his kingdom following his death. **Antipas and Philip** were sons of Herod and ruled a tetrarchy each, and **Lysanias** was just an appointed leader about whom we know very little. Each of these individuals is connected with Rome and its power. **Annas and Caiaphas** are high priests, religious leaders and yet still controlled by Rome. And once again there are family connections at work: Caiaphas was Annas' son-in-law, so there's lots of nepotism going on in the ancient world!

In verse 2 we're told that "the word of God" came to John. That's Old Testament language that tells us that John is a prophet. In addition you'll notice that John is called in the wilderness...the place of Israel's formation as God's covenant people, which is Luke's way of telling us that God is "reforming" his people, calling them back to God. We've noted before how Luke ties together what God is doing in Jesus with what God has done in the past, and so here Luke is telling us that what he is up to in John is a continuation of God's salvation history.

We're told that John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. While baptism wasn't new – the Jews practiced repeated, rituals washings for temporary cleansing – this one-time baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sins is unprecedented. "Repentance" means "to change one's mind" but it's also connected in the Old Testament to turn to God. That's what John is up to...preparing people for the new age that Jesus is inaugurating, the Kingdom of God.

By quoting Isaiah Luke is not only telling us that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy; quoting Isaiah also gives shape to John's ministry and to the salvation that God is bringing in Jesus. In the ancient world when a king was going to enter into the land a forerunner would travel the main road and announce the king's coming to that the people could prepare the way, making the physical road straight, filling in the ruts and potholes. John, of course, is announcing a most unlikely King – one not born in a palace or wearing fine robes. Nor is the preparation for this King merely a matter of the roads. It's a matter of the heart. Finally, by quoting Isaiah 40 Luke points again to the universal implications of God's salvation in Jesus, for in Jesus "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

So, the child announced by the angel Gabriel, born to Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age, takes his place on the stage of God's salvation history. He comes to prepare the people for what God is about to do, inviting people to repent, to turn toward God.

### ***Warnings and the Way (3:7-14)***

While the words of Isaiah set the stage for John's ministry, the first words of John that Luke records are in verses 7-14, and they are not warm, fuzzy words of Minnesota Lutheranism. Let's listen to John's preaching by reading verses 7-14 [READ]. We could use a lot of words to describe John but subtle and gentle are not two of them!

"You brood of vipers"! How's that for a smooth introduction? Can you imagine if one of us started worship this way here at Prince of Peace, "Good morning you brood of vipers!" Everyone who was hearing John's preaching would have known exactly what he was saying. When a fire starts in the desert snakes are forced out of their holes to flee. The good news that John proclaims of God's salvation, of the new age that Jesus is ushering in, also implies a judgment for those who resist it, who do not respond to John's call to repent, to turn to God.

And true repentance will be known by its fruit. That is to say if people truly turn to God it shows in their behavior, especially in the way we treat others. All need to repent, says John, because no one is innocent. It isn't enough, John says, to merely claim your lineage as a part of the Jewish race. Being a part of God's covenant people doesn't mean you don't need to turn to God to be ready for what he is about to do in Jesus. Heck, God can make covenant people out of rocks if he chooses to! Instead John says a failure to repent and to demonstrate the fruits of repentance, has real consequences. John here uses the metaphor of an ax cutting down a tree and the dead wood being thrown into the fire. What does that mean? Well, if you understand the gospel as primarily having to do with who gets into heaven and who goes to hell after we die then you read John's words as saying that if people don't repent they're going to hell. But that's probably not what John has in mind, and that's not how Luke frames the good news. Fire is often a symbol for God's judgment and it frequently refers to a purifying process, a time of burning away the impurities of our sin...which often is the purpose of God's judgment – not to destroy but to purify. In just a few more verses John will tell us that Jesus will baptize people with the Holy Spirit and with fire. While this judgment will certainly be an unpleasant experience it doesn't necessarily point to being cast into hell for eternity. Ultimately living outside of the Kingdom the Jesus is bringing is punishment enough, leading to all sorts of worry and heartache and bondage.

Those are tough words and certainly would have gotten the people's attention, leaving them unsettled. And so the people ask what they should do, and John's answer is fascinating. Notice he doesn't say, "Well, just believe in this guy Jesus and you won't go to hell." Instead he calls all people to generosity. The hated tax collectors, who made their living through pyramid schemes, extorting money from fellow Jews are included in this repentance and are called to financial integrity. And the Roman soldiers, even more despised than the tax collectors as a part of the enemy, Rome, are including in this movement. They are told to handle their power ethically. The Greek word for "extort" here literally means "to shake violently". What is surprising here is not just WHO is included in this movement of God but that God's movement is one of generosity, justice and equity right here and right now. This is behavior that will answer the petition, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done one earth as it is in heaven." It's not primarily about life after death; it's about life right here and now.

### ***The Ministry of Decreasing (3:15-18)***

John's word to the people was both powerful and compelling, and it would have stirred up a question in people's minds, "Is John the messiah, the one God promised, the one we've been waiting for?" Let's see what John has to say about that by reading verses 15-18 [**READ**]. False messiahs came and went with some frequency in the ancient world, but John wanted to be clear about the fact that he was not the messiah. Instead, John points to Jesus. While John offers a baptism of repentance Jesus will pour out on people the Holy Spirit and fire...again, fire being a symbol of purification and not just

destruction. John claims that Jesus is so much greater that John isn't even worthy of the lowest task done by the lowest slave in a household...untying a guest's sandal and washing their feet. Of course, we'll see Jesus do that very thing later in the story.

The theme of judgment appears again in verse 17, this time using a metaphor that would have been very familiar to the people – the process of winnowing. Farmers in the ancient world would harvest grain and then pound it, breaking open the kernel and separating the valuable grain (usually wheat) from the chaff, the outer shell. This outer shell was useful only for burning. On windy days farmers would use a wooden fork to throw the pounded grain up in the air. The lighter chaff would blow away while the heavier grain would fall straight down. This was a simple way of getting at the desired grain.

John tells us that the coming Messiah has his winnowing fork in his hand to clear his threshing floor. He'll separate the wheat from the chaff, and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Again, if you read the gospel through the lens of who goes to heaven and who goes to hell it's easy to read that verse and think that it says, "If you don't believe in Jesus you're going to hell." But that certainly isn't what the verse says, and I would suggest that it isn't what it means. Consider this:

The OT uses the image of God winnowing when he is dealing with the Israelites. Here's a passage from Jeremiah:

*You have rejected me, says the Lord, you are going backward; so I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you— I am weary of relenting. I have winnowed them with a winnowing fork in the gates of the land; I have bereaved them, I have destroyed my people; they did not turn from their ways. – Jeremiah 15:6-7*

But did God destroy the Israelites for eternity? No! He used the Babylonians and the Assyrians to lead them into exile...not to destroy them but to teach them, to purify them, to call them back to be his people. God's judgment in the OT was always painful but its purpose was not to destroy but ultimately to redeem.

In addition consider that in the Greek that Luke uses the Messiah is said to come "with the Holy Spirit and fire" but that can have a double meaning..."wind and fire"...the same two elements used in the process of winnowing. Perhaps this image doesn't refer to the fact that Jesus is going to separate people into two categories...those who are blessed and are going to heaven and those who are damned and are going to hell. Instead of assuming that some people are wheat and others are chaff, perhaps it means that we are all wheat and chaff. In the coming of the Messiah we will all be winnowed and the chaff of our lives...that which is sinful and not useful for the Kingdom...will be burned as we are purified. And what is useful by God's grace will be used indeed. I find that way of understanding the verse to resonate with God's action in the OT and the God who is going to be revealed in Jesus in the chapters of Luke's gospel to come.

This way of understanding the verse also helps to make sense of verse 18, “So, with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to people.” If this verse is about ultimate condemnation it certainly isn’t good news for all! But if it refers to judgment that, while painful also leads us to purity, to a way to living and being that both blesses us and reveals the coming Kingdom, then it is indeed good news for all.

### ***Earthly Power and God’s Purposes (3:19-20)***

Not everyone, however, is thrilled with John’s call to repentance. Verses 19-20 give us a glimpse into the first direct clash between God’s purposes and the corrupt powers of this world [**READ**]. John’s call to repentance reached even the highest echelon society, to Herod the Tetrarch. Both Herod and Herodias had been married, and each divorced their spouses to marry one another. In addition, Herodias had been married to Herod’s half-brother, which made her off-limits to Herod by Jewish law. Herod, however, only wanted what he wanted and so typical of hardened sinners he not only ignored John’s rebuke, he also imprisoned John. We’ll discover how that imprisonment ends in a later chapter. Suffice it to say that at this point in the story Luke has set the trajectory for John’s future. He indeed will decrease. He will leave the stage of this story so that Jesus can take it fully.

### ***The Baptism of Jesus (3:21-22)***

And Jesus does indeed take the stage in verses 21-22. Let’s read them as we close this section [**READ**]. Jesus’ baptism begins his public ministry and communicates some important things from the beginning.

1. Jesus identifies with John’s ministry and therefore with the people he has come to serve. He enters the story here as he did in Bethlehem...as one of us.
2. Jesus is a man of prayer, dependent upon the guidance and strength of God. More than any other Gospel Luke shows us Jesus’ love of prayer, implying our need for prayer.
3. The anointing with the Holy Spirit empowers Jesus’ ministry. This gift is one that Jesus will pass on to the disciples later in this gospel and in Acts 2.
4. God’s voice affirms Jesus and also connects him to two important OT passages.

*I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you. – Psalm 2:7.* This verse was used at the coronation of Israel’s kings, thus affirming Jesus’ Kingship.

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. – Isaiah 42:1.* This verse points to Jesus as the servant of God, the one who will suffer for God’s purposes. Originally

Isaiah 42 may have described Israel as a nation that was called to serve God's purposes but it was later understood to also describe the coming Messiah.

The stage is now set for Jesus' public ministry. What Jesus will do as the story unfolds is extraordinary. But Luke is not only pointing to Jesus in this section. He's also pointing to us. We, too, have been baptized. We, too, have been anointed with the Holy Spirit. We, too, have been told that we are beloved children of God. Jesus is not the only one prepared to do extraordinary things in the world. We are too. How are you continuing Jesus' ministry in the world? How is your daily repentance, your daily turning to God, bearing fruit? How are you living justice and equity, revealing God's coming Kingdom? Remember what we're learning through our current sermon series: this isn't just God's story, it's ours.