

Advent 2 - Luke 3:1-6 --- “Preparing People for Jesus”¹

Before the Lesson: Prepare the handout, “The Power of Parallels” for the Information session. Prepare a/v equipment to watch the 2:23-minute video, “What was Jesus’ concept of the Kingdom?” found here: <https://m.bibleodyssey.org/video-gallery/jesus-and-the-kingdom/> .

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

What wakes you up in the morning?

Do you pick your clothes out the night before or the morning of going to work (school, etc.)?

Information

Today, we continue our Advent series. Advent is a time of preparation. We are getting ready for Christmas! In today’s Bible story, we meet John (the Baptist). John was a cousin of Jesus. He was a prophet. Because he lived and died before Jesus’ death and resurrection, some have called John “the last Old Testament prophet.”

Luke addresses his book to Theophilus. “Theophilus means ‘Friend of God.’ Luke may have intended it to be a symbolic name, since he is writing to all those who love God. Of course, there might have been an individual named Theophilus, in which case the name would be both personal for the man so named and symbolic for the rest of us.”²

Luke is a master of telling stories that parallel one another. His first example of that is found in the stories of Zechariah and Mary.

- Distribute and walk through the handout, “The Power of Parallels.”

Luke has introduced us to John’s family already in chapter 1. When Mary discovered she was pregnant, she went to stay with her cousin, Elizabeth. Elizabeth was an older woman but was pregnant with her first child. Her husband, Zechariah, had been struck dumb because he did not believe the Lord’s message that he would become a parent in his old age. When that child was born, his father was able to speak again.

- Have a class member read Luke 1:62-66.

“What then will this child become?” is about to be answered. But first, Luke wants to give us some historical context.

- Have a class member read Luke 3:1-2.

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc., 2023. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

² Richard Rohr, *The Good News According to Luke: Spiritual Reflections* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 57.

Why do you think Luke feels the need to include all these political characters? (to introduce characters who will play into the trial of Jesus; to insist that this story is “real”; to set up the tension between the world’s and heaven’s “king of the Jews”; etc.)

“The Gospel which Luke has to proclaim is a gospel of world salvation, But he is writing for educated Romans, and he is well aware how hard it must be for them to believe that the ultimate truth about human dynasty is to be sought in a member of a despised race, who was executed on a criminal charge at the order of a Roman governor in an outlying providence of the empire. Somehow he must find the means of overcoming this initial handicap, and he starts his main narrative boldly by claiming the events he is about to relate are a part of world history.”³

God was at work in a particular time and place. We believe God is still at work in our world. Let’s imagine we were writing a story of God at work in our community this week. As Luke prefaced his story with “persons in power” at the time, how might we describe our time and setting?

Like the religious leaders of John’s day, we may be tempted to believe that God is at work exclusively through our denomination or our church or, even, only through *American* Christians. However, God is at work all over the world and uses all sorts of methods and means and persons to reach the goal of reconciliation – that is, making things right. If we look with different eyes at our context, we may be surprised to see who God is using to build God’s kingdom.

How do you feel about this idea – that God would use “outsiders” to reach God’s goals?

Although Luke lists political powers and influential priests, the word of God is coming through an outsider – a powerless prophet who wanders the wilderness. Most of the others that Luke names, we will hear from again, particularly in Jesus’ last week. They, too, will also have a place in helping God’s will to happen.

- Have a class member read Luke 3:3-6.

Have you ever woken up in a strange place to wonder, “Where am I?” What are the thoughts that go through your head from the time you wake to the time you get started with your day?

[Use the comments just made and the comments that follow to jot the italicized words on a board:] When we wake up in a strange place, we might begin with *confusion* and *disorientation*. “Where am I? This is not normal.” Then, we *re-view* our setting and begin to put some pieces together. We *remember* why we are in this strange place. We *reorient* our thinking. This is a “new normal,” at least for now. We know where we are, why we are here, and what we are to do.

Maybe John went through a similar process. John may have woken up to discover that he was living in a “new normal.” A new day was breaking and with that change, people needed to change. If “repent” means “change,” was John insisting that people go back to the way things were or was he insisting on a new way of living into the new-normal?

- Have class members read Psalm 51:1-2, 7 and Isaiah 1:15-17.

³ G. B. Caird, *Saint Luke*, Westminster Pelican Commentary (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 69.

What do these verses tell us about washing and repentance?

When you were baptized, was it a baptism of repentance? Or, would you give it some other category (such as a “baptism of belonging” or a “baptism of ‘fire insurance’”)?

Has the purpose of baptism evolved as the church has matured or have we wandered from its symbolism?

John’s message is a “wake-up call” to repent and then to be baptized as a symbol of that repentance. [Point to the italicized words, now on the board:] How does this reorientation pattern of “waking up in a strange place” relate to our spiritual lives and repentance?

John’s mission was to prepare people for Jesus. Ancient prophets had preached the same message – that rituals and religiosity are no substitute for repentance and reconciliation. Soon, the message would be not only heard, but seen, in the life of Jesus Christ.

Transformational exercise

We began our lesson by talking about waking up and getting ready for the day. Our alarm goes off, we choose our clothes, and we think through what we hope to accomplish. Advent is a time to “get ready” for Christmas Day.

One of the first things we do to get ready for a new day is we wash ourselves off. We may take a bath or a shower or wash our face. It’s like a mini-baptism every morning!

John’s message was, “Wake up! Repent! God is coming soon!”

It turns out that Jesus’ message would be different. There *is* a call to be aware of God and to repent of sin that separates us from God. But the coming Kingdom of God is more than what God is about to do (come to rebuke, swing the ax, burn the chaff, etc.) The kingdom of God is “near” - and we are participants or partners in its coming.

[Show the 2:23-minute video, “What was Jesus’ concept of the Kingdom?” found here: <https://m.bibleodyssey.org/video-gallery/jesus-and-the-kingdom/> .]

“God, without you, won’t. You, without God, can’t.” - Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Close in a prayer something like this: *As Christmas approaches, O God, help us to prepare the way for the Lord of Christmas. John the Baptist has reminded us that it is important to get our souls clean and ready to welcome the Lord. Forgive us of our sins. Cleanse us of all unrighteousness. Make us right. And, then, use us, Lord. Make us worthy partners in the building of your Kingdom. Amen.*

The Power of Parallels

What we have in these first two chapters of Luke is a series of parallels...For example, those familiar with the Hebrew scriptures would immediately see the interaction between Zechariah and Elizabeth about having a child in old age as comparable to that of Abraham and Sarah...The narrative in which the birth of John the Baptist is announced parallels - almost step by step - the annunciation scene where Jesus' birth is foretold."⁴

Birth of John the Baptist	Birth of Jesus
Gabriel comes to Zechariah	Gabriel comes to Mary
Zechariah is frightened	Mary is frightened
But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John."	But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus."
"He will be great in the sight of the Lord."	"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."
Zechariah asks, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."	Mary asks, "How will this be since I am a virgin?"
Miraculous work: "You will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens."	Miraculous work: "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

⁴ Richard Rohr, *The Good News According to Luke: Spiritual Reflections* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 59.