

Christmas is coming. So, tell me something I don't know, some of you are saying under your breath. Sometimes there is joy in counting down the days before a vacation or a special event, other times, it feels like the proverbial snowball rolling down a hill that is going to run you over before you can get out of the way. Sometimes we can't wait to get home because it is a respite, a blessing, and a joy to be back in loving arms. But other times, even home can scare us. Home can be a place of judgment, of antagonism or pain. We are frustrated when we don't have the sense of family all the Christmas specials say we ought to have. We may be a long way from being ready to go home.

It's easy to recognize that there is much to do before Christmas gets here. We've got to move heaven and earth; we've got to shovel out; we've got to clear a path. It's as if we are in an airplane disaster movie and we're on a crippled jetliner going off the runway. Everyone is shouting; the machines aren't working; there is disaster on the horizon. It is as though there is never enough time, like it's all going to fall apart, and it is all our fault! When we lived in New Jersey, there was a drugstore chain that used the advertising tagline, “Christmas is closer than you think.” It didn't sound like a helpful reminder, it sounded like a threat.

But that is why John the Baptist fits in so well with the season of Advent. There is plenty of threat in the early part of the Gospel of Luke. Sometimes, we'd prefer to skip over John's tirade and get on to the angels and the sheep and the baby. But let's pause and listen in again: *“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 people will see God's salvation”* (Luke 3:4-6).

Another thing that really jumps out at me is that Luke located this event with six different points of reference in verses 1 & 2. He confirmed it six-ways to Sunday, to coin a phrase. There must be something in that, don't you think?

OK, the locations don't help us all that much, since there is somewhat of a fudge factor in the dates of the various rulers mentioned in the first couple of verses. No one, for example, is sure who Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene really is. The Lysanias everyone knows about (well, everyone who is really into ancient political history, that is) was long dead by the time of John the Baptist. So, did Luke mess up, or was there another Lysanias who isn't as well known? Does it matter? Not very much. What matters is that Luke wanted everyone to be sure of something. And if it isn't the pinpoint accuracy of the date of the launching of John's ministry, then what is it?

It must be that Luke was interested in grounding this whole event in the real world—a least on one level. He wanted the readers and hearers of this story to know this wasn't a “once upon a time” thing, but a “shake the foundations of the real-world” kind of thing. If the Bible scholars who claim that Luke was a Gentile are right, then we can understand this insistence on veracity. For a Jewish teacher, the story was truth enough. Facts are not convincing; truth is. And a truth wrapped in a parable, written in a poem, sung in a song is still true. But for the Gentiles, like us, it must connect with facts. Just the facts, ma'am. So, Luke says, you want facts? Here you go: “*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar*” (v. 1) and so on and so forth.

But wait. That can't be the whole story. Just a little too vague for that. I think there is something else going on here, something theological. Ah, there's a word that many of us shy away from. But all it really means is thinking about things that matter to God. All the Gospel writers were more theologians than they were historians, or even writers. What they cared most about was making sure that we understood something about the nature of God. So, what do we discover about God in these first few verses of Chapter 3?

Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas were all powerful leaders in the world at the time. They were emperors, governors, rulers, and high priests. They were the ones who held the levers of power. They were the ones who determined the course of civilization. They

were the ones who determined what was a priority, where the efforts would be placed in the world of their day. But notice what Luke does: after listing all these worldly powers, Luke then says simply “*the word of God came to John son of Zechariah IN THE WILDERNESS*” (v. 2).

It was like there was this smorgasbord available. Take your pick of rulers and wealth and power, but God chose “none of the above.” In the voting booth of the coming kingdom of God, God had a write-in candidate. Instead of the ones that we would have chosen, instead of the ones who seemed to be the proper starting point, God chose a nobody in the middle of nowhere. And God told him to get things started.

“*Prepare the way for the Lord*” (v. 4). He then went about launching the construction project that would bring the source of real power onto the scene. So, make way, he says, straighten the highway, fill in the trenches, smooth out the bumps in the road. The point here is that there is work to be done: getting-ready work; opening-up work; looking down the road work.

Sure, let the bigwigs launch their policy initiatives, levy their taxes, try to keep Rome from going over one fiscal cliff or another. Let Caesar write himself into the history books and let Herod do whatever in the world it was Herod wanted to do. Let the religious folks carry out their sacred duties and keep up the rituals of the ages. But if it’s the climax of salvation you’re looking for, then turn away from all that. Go to the WILDERNESS. Go to the crazy man IN THE WILDERNESS who has just now lit out on a career of fire-and-brimstone prophetic preaching.

Because that, Luke is saying, is where the “Salvation Highway of Our God” is being constructed. Rome built its roads and highways and bridges, true enough. You could get around the ancient world better than at almost any point in recorded human history. The roads were impressive. Caesar’s wife had begun a “Highway Beautification” initiative. The roads were grand, the travel was easy, the trade routes were prosperous. But not one of those roads could finally take

you anywhere worth going. Oh, traveling on them could help you get around in the world but not one of them could save the world, or certainly not usher in a New World. For that road, you had to go to the place of death, to the dangerous WILDERNESS where robbers lurked, and wild beasts devoured the wayward traveler. You had to go to the place that symbolized everything that was wrong with this world because that was the place—logically enough, if you stop to think about it—from which God launched his final push to defeat the Chaos of evil and bring back his good Creation.

In our world today, we still mostly look to all the wrong places for hope: Washington, Wall Street, Hollywood, etc. Luke says, “Nothing doing.” Hope won’t come from those places. Not finally. Not ultimately. Look to the unlikely places. Look to the little white clapboard churches in the middle of nowhere in which sermons are preached full of Jesus and full of grace. Look to the relief worker ministering in Jesus’ name to people in South Africa who are now suffering through the Omicron variant of coronavirus. If you want change that lasts, transformation that taps into what C.S. Lewis called “the deep magic of the universe,” those are the places to go.

Maybe “Christmas is closer than you think” isn’t a threat after all. Maybe it shouldn’t make us feel more frenzied, or more behind, or more afraid we won’t be ready in time. Maybe that phrase ought to be a promise, a comfort. Maybe it ought to be an assurance that we are not alone in this season of Emmanuel because *God is with us*. Maybe it ought to be a means by which we can overcome the fear of wherever it is that we are going.

If you feel like you’re in the *wilderness*, Christmas is closer than you think!  
Glory to God! Amen.