

Luke 3:1-20

Luke 3:4-6 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet saying, "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 brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God"

The birth stories of John the Baptist and Jesus in chapters 1 and 2 set up the story that Luke is to tell of the ministry, message, sacrifice and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The two chapters link the births and the lives of John and Jesus. They describe specific fulfillments of messianic expectation. They build curiosity and interest as to how the promise represented by the births of two baby boys is to be realized once they have become mature.

Chapter 3 continues to set the table for what is to come. First, Luke sets the scene by establishing the time and the politics of the region as John began to preach in the wilderness. The picture is mixed. The birth stories showed the vibrant faith of a community waiting for and expecting the appearance of their Messiah. The politics of the time are that of Jewish subjection to Rome, the now notorious rulers, Pilate and Herod are in power and the Jewish temple is known to be corrupt at the top in the persons

of Annas and Caiaphas. The presence of good and evil is established and so the story moves forward with the sense that an inevitable conflict will erupt as the story reaches its climax.

Enter - the prophet. Just like in the times of old, "The word of God came to John..." And his words were in themselves a fulfillment of Isaiah who spoke of one who would prepare the way of the Lord, and this is Luke's characterization of John's ministry.

The idea is that if a community knows that the king is coming, then it will prepare the way so that the king will be able to arrive smoothly and safely. A comparison could be made to the LA Olympics. The city will prepare so that the games can be played in the best of circumstances and so that the visitors to the city from around the world can be accommodated in comfort and safety. The prophetic word intended to bring the community to the moment when they could say, "The king is coming and we are ready."

So the metaphor of "preparing for the king's arrival" has a spiritual application. John's preaching was on point. He left no doubt as to the "state of the city" addressing his attendees as "You brood of vipers..." To be ready for the Lord's coming the people needed to repent from their sinful ways and turn back to God. Many in John's audience were religious and devout. To them, he called for kindness and generosity to be shown to the poor. But he also attracted the

attention of many who were known to be sinners and so he told the tax collectors to "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." Roman soldiers were also present and so he told them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages." So we note that John's preaching was direct, personal, practical and that he made the vertical (our relationship with God) horizontal as he defined repentance in terms of change in how people were to treat each other.

As John preached in these ways the people speculated as to whether he was the Messiah or not. (The messianic expectation of the birth stories is alive and well 30 years later) And so they talked to each other and wondered in their hearts and even asked John if he were the Christ. John answered frankly that he was not but that one mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to unloose. He contrasted his baptism with water to the coming one's baptism with the Holy Spirit.

John preached to everyone in this specific and direct way. He even took on royalty and called upon Herod to repent from his marital sin (among others) This infuriated Herod and he arrested John and put him in prison. This act had the effect of giving the entire stage to Jesus, the one of whom John would say that he was unworthy unloose his shoes. And so Luke has us where he wants us, anticipating the story of Jesus.