

## Comfort, Comfort Ye My People

Luke 3:1-6

*by Michael G. Lilienthal*

Take a walk into the wilderness.

There, in the blistering heat of the desert, we find John, the son of Zechariah. We heard previously how John “was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel” (Luke 1:80). That statement was made to create anticipation. When will we see this John again? And now, Luke gives us the historical context: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” At long last! The child’s purpose is fulfilled in becoming prophet. All this historical context is given because the coming of this word of God to John “is a significant event in both world and salvation history.”<sup>1</sup> His preaching thereafter, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” marks a new era. This word of God coming to John was God speaking to John in the wilderness, and from that communion John sought to direct others toward the same thing that he had. Under the power of the word that came to him, John became a prophet with a message

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<sup>1</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 148.

for God's people. To point out the purpose of this prophet, Luke quotes from Isaiah chapter 40, where the prophet records God's command and message:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that her warfare is ended,  
that her iniquity is pardoned,  
that she has received from the LORD'S hand  
double for all her sins.  
A voice cries:  
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.  
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.' (Is. 40:1-5)

What was it that God said to John in the wilderness? Certainly there was included the command to preach and to baptize, including some instructions on the method of doing this. But we are left to speculate based on the few details we do know; but perhaps God's call to John included the words of the prophet Isaiah, which we sing in the hymn: **"Comfort, Comfort Ye My People."**

### **I. Repent of Sin**

John's message is one of Gospel. Now, if we read on just after this quotation from Isaiah, it might not seem so, because he says "to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'" (Luke 3:7). He pointed out the excuses the people might make, the things that would make them feel secure, such as assuring themselves, "We have Abraham as our

father” (3:8). Now imagine if you came to church and sat in your customary seat where you’ve sat for the last twenty years, and instead of beginning with a hymn or prayer I entered the pulpit and started shouting insults at you. How long would you take it? Would you ever come back? It doesn’t seem like a very loving or gospel-like message.

But it is. John’s whole message, beginning with the warning of “the wrath to come” was the proclamation of “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John is a teacher, providing a catechism instruction in the basic truths of God’s message for all people. These basic truths take shape in the rite of passage which was so central to his message that it became incorporated into his name: “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” All this represents a *change*. Oh, no! Not change! It is a change from the Old into the New; the Old anticipated the coming of the Messiah, while the New realizes his coming. John’s preaching and work was to point to the immediacy of Jesus’ arrival, and the final work he would accomplish when he died on the cross, bleeding out forgiveness for the whole world. Thus John’s “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” is a unit concept, and has three distinct parts:

1) Baptism, the washing of water. Baptism is the visible means by which one crosses from one land into another. John’s baptism was in many aspects very similar to our baptisms, except that he probably never baptized “in the name the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Were those he baptized then in need of being baptized later? By no means. Our baptism in the name of the Trinity saves us. This baptism was “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” It actually accomplished forgiveness; that was its purpose and its result. But I’m jumping ahead.

2) Repentance, turning away from one thing and toward another. Repentance is two-faced, looking “both backward toward the regretted sin and forward toward the accepted pardon.”<sup>2</sup> Repentance marks the leaving of the old and looking forward to what will come next.

3) Forgiveness of sins, their removal “as far as the east is from the west” (Ps. 103:12). “To forgive sins is to release a person from them, as a prisoner is freed from a dungeon.”<sup>3</sup> Forgiveness is the land of promise, where salvation is to be had; sin is the old wilderness, where death and starvation lay.

So see the majesty of John’s ministry. He was himself “in the wilderness,” which was itself a great big visual aid for John’s audience, “to fix their minds and hearts on their spiritual condition.”<sup>4</sup> I told you to take a walk into the wilderness. But where is the wilderness? It is your own heart. Recall the nation of Israel wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Why did they have to do that? The nation moaned, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” (Num. 14:2-3). Because they disbelieved God’s ability and desire to fulfill the promise he made, to bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, and preferred to rely on themselves, abandon God and choose their own leader, God demonstrated to

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<sup>2</sup> Lenski 178.

<sup>3</sup> Just, *op. cit.*, 149-150.

<sup>4</sup> Lenski 177.

them the error of their ways by disciplining them with 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, during which time all who had heard God's promise and disbelieved died out, and a new generation who believed him grew up. All this must be in the minds of any Jews who came to John for baptism. And just as the new generation was finally able to come into the Promised Land by crossing over the Jordan, John demonstrates a spiritual crossing into God's promise in the same water: stepping away from disbelief, away from rejecting God, away from sin, through the baptism which was repentance, the act of turning, and up onto the other side of forgiveness, salvation. This is the essence of John's work: Sin is realized by the Law, and by the aid of the hot wilderness all around, pointing out the need for salvation; then the preaching and baptizing causes the turning of repentance which brings forgiveness.

Within each of us dwells these two nations: the old generation of Israel who, even though they had seen God's plagues and miracles of even crossing them through the Red Sea, nevertheless rejects God and prefers to do, say, eat, think whatever *I* want; and also the new generation of Israel who is raised up by God and brought into the Promised Land of his salvation. This duality is in each Christian; we call it *simul iustus et peccator*, at the same time saint and sinner, and because of our own baptisms, we daily come to repentance in which we drown that old Adam and raise to life the new man, who is in the image of Jesus, wearing Jesus' righteousness as a robe because Jesus wore

our sinfulness as his robe when he died on the cross, a new man who walks “before God in righteousness and purity.”<sup>5</sup>

## II. See the Salvation of God

This transformation should be yours. It is illustrated by the wilderness, and not merely as a crossing from the wilderness into the Promised Land, but as a transformation of the wilderness itself: remember, this wilderness is your own self-interested sinful heart.

The voice in the wilderness cries out, “Prepare the way of the Lord, / make his paths straight.” A path is to be built, one that is direct and unswerving. And more, “Every valley shall be filled, / and every mountain and hill shall be made low.” This is a miraculous thing. Can you accomplish what the voice in the wilderness asks of you? Can you cause the Grand Canyon to be level with the ground around it? Can you topple Mt. Everest so that a child could crawl over it? In fact, it would be easier for you to do this with these landforms than for you to accomplish the same transformation in your own heart, “for to prepare the Lord’s way into our hearts is a work which, strictly speaking, he alone can perform, and when we are asked to do it, it is only in the sense that we use his law and gospel and let their power operate in our hearts.”<sup>6</sup>

This is indeed how these things are being accomplished. Even right now, as the Word is preached to you, Law and Gospel, they are efficacious — they cause a change within you. When the Law is preached, such as when John shouted, “You brood of

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<sup>5</sup> *Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism* (Mankato: ELS, 2001), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Lenski 183.

vipers!” then your eyes are opened to see the horrifying state you are in if left on your own (Luke 3:7). Not only are you surrounded by the monsters of your nightmares, but you are one of those monsters. This realization should trigger in you the desire to be saved. You have been crushed by the wrath of God coming. This is the beginning of the turning, one of the two faces of repentance, when you look back at your sin. But then, when the Gospel is preached, and you hear, “Your sins are forgiven,” that is the second face of repentance, when you see clearly the promises of God, when you see clearly his salvation.

John’s role was to sweep the road clear that led to Jesus, and by the preaching of a baptism of repentance, to turn people onto the road and set them learning Jesus. It is all Gospel-centered, yes, showing people their sin, but also demonstrating to them (using visual aids and the preaching of God’s Word) how it is that God came to them and brought them out of sin and into salvation. If that road is clear, therefore, you should be able to look down it and see Jesus there on the cross. But wait, he is no longer on the cross. For he has arisen, and

all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death[.] We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Rom. 6:3-5)

And there you see, the message given to John, the message given to me as your pastor, the message given to each one of you to share with those who need to hear it, the message that causes you to point your finger down the straight road of God’s Word,

pointing directly at the Son of God who died in the place of all people and who rose to bring those people to life with him, that message which belongs to all of us is, "Comfort, comfort ye my people."

Amen.