

As I was reading about this passage, I discovered that some scholars think that this was the original beginning of Luke's gospel, to which the first two chapters were added. You can feel where they come from: John and Jesus as babies. Jesus as a youth, and then BAM, next comes the story of the adult Jesus. Original or not, I am thankful that the first two chapters have our favorite Christmas stories.

Luke 3:1-6

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent when we prepare ourselves for the Coming of Christ. Each year, this Sunday brings the story of John the Baptist.

You know John, that character who comes to Christmas dinner, and everyone is on pins and needles, worried about what he will do or say this year. What will he do to bring to the family dinner, not green bean casserole but chaos to our family time at the table? Do you know who I am talking about? Most of us have that one member of our family. We love him dearly but wish he could be a little more delicate with what is said.

Well, this Sunday, he seems to be on his best behavior. But Luke is not. Luke sets the stage for John with topics we might want to avoid at dinner, such as religion and politics. Emperor Tiberius, Herod, ruler of Galilee, tetrarchs Philip and Lysanias, and Pilate, governor of Judea, are there. And just so we are clear that this is about the powers that be, he mentions Annas and Caiaphas as high priests.

This is the world of John, Jesus, and you and me. John, a priest turned prophet, comes into a messy world like ours. A world of Presidents Biden and Trump, Vladimir Putin and President Zelinski, as well as Governor Hochul and Senator Fetterman, Pope Francis, and Rick Warren. John is not some pie-in-the-sky prophet; Luke tells us he comes to us in a world much like our own; it may seem like "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...." but it is much like the world of people in every day and age.

Luke wants us to know that the coming of John and Jesus after him are part of God's work in history. He comes amid our lives as we seek to live faithfully in a mixed-up, jumbled-up carnival world.

Luke emphasizes that John is a prophet of significant significance as he quotes Isaiah's words to a person returning from exile in Babylon. People had been captured by Babylon and exiled to distant land. Luke speaks words of hope that God is building a road for us to travel as God comes to bring us home. God is coming to bring us home.

John is known as the one who baptizes in the river Jordan, reminding the people of their lives as they escaped enslavement in Egypt and God brought them home. His baptism was like the ritual washings of the Jewish people that would cleanse them from impurities and sin. The baptism called them to repent, change their hearts and lives, and turn to a new direction. His voice is sometimes annoying like that GPS voice telling us to recalculate the route and return to the route. John is calling us to return our hearts and lives to God.

It meant getting our inner and outer lives in order to change how we live and get on board. Like the old song "People Get Ready for a Train's a Comin'." God is sending us a way to get home. God is sending one to us, a Messiah, to meet us and bring us home.

We will no longer be in exile away from God, and as the spiritual goes, "Ain't That Good News."

John's words may also sound strange to us because instead of focusing on himself, he points to someone coming. It's not about me, but the God-sent Messiah who will bring us home on a highway God is building. In Jesus, God becomes temporal present in time, bringing peace shalom.

All this is well and good but what does that have to do with us? A great deal! John is asking us what exile you need to be brought home from. Is there an addiction to alcohol or drugs, shopping and spending beyond our means, abuse, bitterness, racism, bigotry, despair, depression, grief, guilt, shame, being an abuser, or pornography, which, according to the Barna group with news of society and religion, is epidemic? Where is that area, that place of exile for us? There are so many spots of exile for us. God is coming to us to bring salvation to us. Sometimes, that means changing our outer lives and always changing our inner lives. God doesn't always change our circumstances, but how we respond to them is always involved.

That is why I have always liked Jeremiah 29, 4-7:

⁴The Lord of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. ⁷Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare."

Jeremiah doesn't say God is ending the exile right now, but change your outlook and make the best of your life. Bloom where you are planted. It is a way God can bring us home, too. Wherever we are we know that love is coming to us. Jesus is bringing us home to God from our own personal exile.

Praise God for our homecoming, our salvation, Amen.