

Bulldozed by Baptism: The Better to See You With
Advent 2
Luke 3:1-6

Robert W. Bertram

[A "Crossings" presented at the Sebring Seminary, Cape Coral, Florida,
November 14, 2000.]

In 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 Ituracea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as 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.
Every 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;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Diagnosis: Wilderness

Initial Diagnosis (External Problem):

Our problem, like that of Jesus' contemporaries, is symbolized by where we live and feel safe, in civilized communities where things are under control and more or less on schedule: "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberias Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, . . . in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas." That's a problem? Yes, for such law and order societies, whether secular or religious, also encourage a false sense of security. We use our cities and temples to hide behind, like circling the wagons, protecting ourselves not just from the surrounding wilderness and predators and outlaws (as we should) but also from the painful truth about ourselves. The real wilderness is we, disguised as citizens, harbored within the city limits.

Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem):

Worse yet, deluded about our safety inside our civilized sanctuaries, we are less and less able to repent, let alone repent "for the forgiveness of sins." Who needs that anymore? In fact, with our walled-in safety and conveniences repentance and absolution seem almost quaint, unsophisticated, a throwback to primitive times -- to "the sticks."

Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem):

Worst of all, the very architecture of our cities, figuratively speaking, gets in the way of our seeing the most important parade ever to drive through our world: the arriving Savior. His offbeat parade route is hidden from view by the walls and the high-rises and the closed doors and the corners we build. Our buildings and boulevards might as well be mountains and valleys and twisting canyons, considering how little we can "see" over them and around them and below them to the procession passing us by, "the salvation of our God." With such uneven terrain, such poor visibility, it is the city really which symbolizes the real "wilderness," though it thinks of itself as quite the opposite, an oasis of strength and safety.

Prognosis

Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution):

So where does the arriving Savior make his entry? Significantly, not in the city but out in the wilderness, to which the city-folk had to make a long humiliating trek, out from behind the false safety of their culture, and then only to hear not the Savior himself (not yet) but merely his wild and woolly advance-man, a tough-talking desert preacher named John, to whom -- and not to Caesar or Herod or Caiaphas -- "the word of God came." Was this meant just to bring the high and mighty down low, to repentance? That, too, definitely. But finally, as we know from what comes later, it is to people as they really are and not as they ought to be, as sinners in their "wild"-ness and their be-"wild"-erment and their God-"desert"-edness, that the Savior comes at all -- straightaway and on the level. Why else would he come to "forgive?"

Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution):

Better yet, the baptizing which John performed (and which we perform still) floods away -- dare I say bulldozes? -- those mountains and valleys and bends inside the sinners which might obstruct their "seeing the salvation of God." For that is what baptism is for, for the seeing by faith, for enabling sinners to recognize the Savior for who he truly is. And thanks to baptism, what we see is what we get, "the forgiveness of sins."

Final Prognosis (Eternal Solution):

Best of all, those who came out to the wilderness and heard John "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin" did not remain there. The baptized are not hermits and recluses, escapees from civilization. On the contrary, they return to the city, yet not as they left it but as transformed and transforming, as creative subversives. That's where, back to civilization -- "Herod being tetrarch of Galilee" -- that John himself eventually returned, and finally laid his head. So did the coming Savior.