

Second Sunday in Advent

REGIME CHANGE

Luke 3:1-6

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Analysis by Stephan K. Turnbull

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 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 sh all 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.'"

Setting the Scene:

A quick glance at a Gospel synopsis reveals two unique features of this Lukan account of the ministry of the Baptist. Luke's extended OT quotation climaxes predictably in extending the

blessings of the messianic age to “all flesh,” matching Luke’s persistent reminder that God’s good news is for Gentiles too; but even more conspicuous is Luke’s extended historical introduction dating John’s ministry relative to the contemporary Roman, Herodian, and Jewish leaders. If we are not careful, we will file this historical note under the traditional categories of Luke’s historiographical tendencies or even his emphasis on salvation history. Either way we will miss his other well known concern for economic reversal, and in a passage that repeats Mary’s earlier vision of lifting up the lowly and bringing down the haughty, this would be an unfortunate oversight indeed. Luke’s identification of this constellation of self-serving, oppressive political leaders as the context in which John will herald the coming Kingdom of God sets off the gracious, loving counter-character of that Kingdom in sharp relief.

DIAGNOSIS: “The kingdom of this world...”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Under It

This world is not as it should be, and few people know this better than those who suffer under the thumb of its oppressive systems and tyrants. Past or present, foreign or domestic, our way of running God’s world is nothing like He intended, or requires.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : On Top of It

The sad truth is that too many of us like it this way. Those who ally themselves with the power systems of Caesars past and present are content in their opposition to God. Sadder still perhaps is that those who toil under it only hope to take advantage of it someday, and have demonstrated historically that once they do rise to power they are powerless to change the system. Today’s revolutionaries are just tomorrow’s tyrants. Our hearts and hopes are corrupt.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Going Down with It

Does it need to be said that the kingdom that opposes God is a sinking ship? Our corrupt hearts and hopes pledge their allegiance to a kingdom doomed to be brought low.

PROGNOSIS: “...is become the Kingdom of our God, and of His Christ.”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Captured by It*

Of course the Kingdom of God was never going to be established by our power anyway. The baptism that John administered wasn't for the already holy; it was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, i.e. it was and is for sinners. John doesn't know it yet, but the Regent of this Kingdom will ascend his inglorious throne on Calvary's crest to accomplish exactly the incorporation of sinners that John's baptizing presages.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Changed by It*

Those who trust this good news of the Kingdom of God find themselves now graciously caught up in it, and they find their hearts and hopes changed. In Jesus the King they see and experience a new way of hoping, living, and loving their neighbors. Might no longer makes right in this Kingdom, and, by fits and starts, these new Kingdom dwellers begin to live in its strange new practices.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Deputized into Its Service*

Chief among these new practices is taking on the very mantle of the herald that John hands down, bearing witness to the Lord who is coming again. And now these new deputy heralds exercise their speech, and even their occasional positions of worldly authority, as a witness to “all flesh” that they shall soon see the salvation of God. The world shall again be as it should be, as God Himself made it to be.