

# Second Sunday of Advent

## THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING OUT IN THE WILDERNESS

Luke 3:1-6

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### Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

1 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, 2 during the high priesthood of Annis and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 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 way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 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; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

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## DIAGNOSIS: The Way of Judgment: God's Deadly Silence

### Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Noisy Times*

What are the voices that define the times in which we live? At first glance it would appear to be the power brokers: The political ones, from the Emperor to the local rulers, and the

ecclesiastical ones, from the chief priest to the local scribes and Pharisees (vv. 1 and 2). (See also David L. Tiede, *Luke: Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 84-85.) After all, they are the ones who make sure their voices keep getting heard, usually at the price of drowning out all other voices. They are the ones who seek to define the times, identifying their interests and their agenda as the good and godly ones. Caesar and Caiaphas are always “right” in that they live on the presumption of “righteousness,” i.e., that their definition of the times is the right one. It is right to wage war for our national interests, Caesar argues; it is holy to preserve this (godly) nation at all costs Caiaphas preaches. Never mind how crooked (v. 5) the path we have to take, Caesar argues; never mind how uneven the playing field of the world has to be, Caiaphas preaches. They argue and preach, in a word, “define,” out of existence their crookedness, their unevenness, their roughness, in a word, their “sin.” And they do so all in the name of daily practicality, in a word, politics. There is no end to their arguments and their preachings. They make sure the times are noisy times, filled with their voices alone, so as to define the times.

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *Unprepared, Noisy Hearts, Deaf to the Wilderness*

The voices that make up the noisy times in which we live are not just the voices of the power brokers. At a much deeper level, those voices are also the voices of our hearts—and that’s the rub. Those voices don’t just define the times they define our very selves. We interiorize those voices. That is, in a real spiritual sense, we believe them. This leaves us totally unprepared to hear any other voice, especially any outside voice from the “wilderness,” from outside the political-ecclesiastical establishment, that might challenge our assumptions, and call us to repentance. Indeed, those voices scare us. For they are

voices that expose the crooked and the uneven ways of the world—ways that our lives are far too dependent upon to question in any serious way. And so, having internalized the voices of the world, we drown out the wilderness voices and deafen our hearts to their message. We too live as though the crookedness and the unevenness of the world don't matter. We live in sin because we have taken to heart the noisy voices of the times.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – “The Way” of Judgment, the Silent Killer**

People who live in such a noisy world and with such noisy hearts, live in false security and in great danger. For beneath the voices that seek to define the times and take possession of our hearts lurks a silent killer, of whom they are too often unaware until it is too late. No! It's not heart disease—at least not only heart disease. No! It's not the quiet scheming of terrorists—at least not only the terrorists. No! It's not the erosion of the market—at least not only the market. The silent killer is the “Way of the Lord” (cf. v. 4) as judgment. That Way is what defines the times, no matter how well we might drown it out with our noisy voices—and that Way is ultimately the great leveler! For God knows the unevenness of life and will level it. The unevenness matters and cannot be tolerated forever. You who think you define the times—beware! God knows the crookedness of your ways and God will straighten it out. You who wish to give voice to the times—beware! For this is what it means in the first instance to “straighten out.” It is like when the police come to “straighten out” a crooked situation. They don't come to help the crooked ones get their life straightened out. They come to put an end to the “crook” themselves. Beware! Prepare! The Way of judgment is what ultimately defines the time.

**PROGNOSIS: The Way of Forgiveness: The Voice in the**

## Wilderness

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *“The Way” of Forgiveness*

The good news for this noisy world, stuck under the Way of God's judgment for its crooked and rough ways, comes in the form of another voice, announcing another Way from that of the Way of judgment. This other Way is not “other” in that it avoids the Way of judgment. Rather, it is “other” in that it is a Way THROUGH that judgment—and is described simply as “Way of the Lord” (v. 4). The voice that announces this Way is the “word of God” (v. 2) delivered by John the Baptizer, in harmony with the promise earlier delivered by Isaiah. This Way is not the way of the silent killer, but the Way of the One who is silently judged and executed—judged and executed for us, for our salvation, for our forgiveness. This is “the Way of the Lord” Jesus Christ. What he is doing is truly amazing. He comes NOT as a prophet to forecast the day of doom. That truth had already been established by earlier prophets. He comes, rather, as God's savior—both to save God for us and to save us for God. He comes to prepare the way for us to pass through the day of judgment and doom into the day of forgiveness and salvation. In him we “see the salvation of God” (v. 6). Just as God prepared a way for Israel to pass through the judgment of exile into a glorious new homecoming as God's people, so in Christ, God has prepared the way for “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” This the Lord Jesus Christ does by his death and resurrection: By being roughed up for our transgressions he smoothes the way for our forgiveness, by his being laid lowed into our death he establishes the way to new life, by becoming “our crook” on the cross he paves the way for a new kind of righteousness. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God has established a Way by which the Way of Judgment itself becomes a level, smooth, straight pathway into the day of salvation.

### **Step 5: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution)** – *Prepared with “a Baptism of Repentance for the Forgiveness of Sins”*

As we saw earlier under the diagnosis, the noisy world made for noisy hearts that were not only distracted from seeing the Way of God’s judgment on their own sin, but on account of that doomed to that judgment. In the word of our text, they were not “prepared” for the judgment to come. Just as those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it so, also, those who ignore the judgment of God on their sin are doomed to experience it. Those who have heard of the new way of forgiveness, live quite differently with regard to the Way of judgment. They never ignore it, but live in a constant state of preparation for it, called “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” This state of preparedness is called a “baptism” because they are totally immersed in what it has to offer – the forgiveness of sins. That means they have internalized what Christ has done, they have taken it to heart, in a word, they believe. This preparedness is rightly called “repentance” because it consists in believers being constant aware of their crookedness and unevenness, not for despair but “for the forgiveness of sins.” Qualifying the word “repentance” with the prepositional phrase “FOR the forgiveness of sins” is very important. It means that repentance is itself transformed into a sign of confidence in God’s new Way of defeating sin AND judgment in Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, not a sign of despair in our sin and God’s judgment.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** – *Crying Out in Noisy Times.*

Confident of the power of the forgiveness of sins, we re-immersing ourselves into the world of daily politics and practical living sounding like the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness,” sounding like John the baptizer, redefining and rewording the Times in light of the new Way in Jesus Christ. While Christians

openly acknowledge the sinfulness of the world, its rough and crooked Ways, and will speak a critical word to that reality, they also acknowledge that they share equally in that criticism. Whatever leveling and straightening out that judgment inflicts on the world, the Christian will stand there with the world. There is no sense of moral or personal superiority in the Christian life—only a sense of solidarity. One powerful example of this is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who left the safe confines of the United State and returned to what he knew was a very crooked and uneven Germany. His reason was this: “I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of the time with my people . . . Christians in Germany will face the terrible of alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or will the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security” (quoted from Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, New York: Harper and Row, 1970). The Christian life is a life that is “prepared” to share the Way of judgment that falls on the world, for that kind of sharing is the new “Way of the Lord” Jesus Christ. But even more, the Christian life is a life that is “prepared” to share the Way of judgment that befalls the world because Christ has prepared the way for “all flesh to see the salvation of God” (v. 6), for all people to pass through judgment to salvation. That’s the kind of life the “word of God” established when it sent John to proclaim “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 3). Go and proclaim likewise.