

Text: Luke 3.1-6

Title: Bringing You a Love That's True: Get Ready

Location: Community Presbyterian Church, Celebration, FL

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Luke 3.1-6

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 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.” ’

Part of Graham family lore centers around the annual Easter family picture on the back patio when I was about three years old ... My father – who is now 88 years old, and, by God’s grace, in reasonably good health – stands with me at the HUB of this particular episode, in part because the incident captures a rarely seen aspect of my Dad’s disposition.

Many of you have met my Dad during his occasional visits here, and you know him – as I do – as a kind-natured, good-humored, loving, gentle, positive guy.

I am the youngest of three kids in our family ... born LATE in my parents’ marriage and the only daughter ... so I was a bit of a Daddy’s girl – and experienced his GENTLE traits probably even more than either of my brothers did.

But on this day, I COMPLETELY ticked off my father ... With all of us dressed in our Easter finest – and probably running late for church – Dad CAREFULLY posed the three of us in just the right position on the wide, cool slab of concrete outside our back door.

“That’s good,” my Dad said, only his CHIN visible beneath the family Kodak ... “Now ... Is everybody ready??”

He paused ever-so-slightly before pressing down his finger ...

In that instant, I felt a surge of 3-year-old power.

“I’m not ready,” I said.

My Dad lowered the camera, not clear about what had prompted my delay. He took a few breaths, then raised the instrument again, poised to CAPTURE family HISTORY with a single click.

“All right then ...” he said. “Is everybody ready?”

Bill and Stephen SMILED and froze into perfect position ... I stirred. “I’m not ready,” I said.

My Dad lowered the camera, SIGHED and shook his head in frustration. Everything had seemed PERFECT ... What could possibly be WRONG?

I couldn’t – or wouldn’t – clarify, though intuition suggests I was just being strong-willed ... I realized that I – three-year-old Nancy Graham – could HALT all progress on this family venture with three little words.

For the third time my Dad raised the camera and – YES – he asked the same question: “Is everybody ready?”

This time, when I made the same reply, my mild-mannered father – who’s a larger, more GREGARIOUS, jovial version of Mister Rogers – RUSHED toward me in an instant ... stooped down to eye level ... grabbed my shoulders and announced, “You’re READY!!”

I’m sure my eyes got WIDE as PLATES ... No more questions ... no more stalling ... We got the photo ... and I learned a lesson about being READY.

Even now, more than four decades after that Easter morning, our family can bust up if we’re together and something prompts one of my brothers to say, with just a HINT of defiance, “I’m not ready ...”

Sadly, there have been PLENTY more times in life when either my BRAIN or my MOUTH has screamed, “I’m NOT READY!” Whether born of stubbornness or FEAR or SIN or personal insecurity ... I have on many occasions felt the interior JELLO slosh: NOT READY ... NOT READY!

I’ll bet you’ve felt it, too ... Walking into CLASS for a grade-determining EXAM ... WAVING as your child leaves for the first day of Kindergarten – or college ... being asked to VOICE a PUBLIC prayer – or to SPEAK at church or a PTSA meeting ... HOVERING at the bedside of a DYING loved one ...

Something internal SLOSHES around: NOT READY!!

Scripture REPEATEDLY reminds us about the importance of being READY ... Jesus frequently announces: “Keep alert! Stay awake! BE READY ... You don’t know the day or the hour ...”

He tells the story of 10 bridesmaids – waiting for the surprise APPEARANCE of a bridegroom and, in the culture of the day, TRIMMING their lamps ... Five have prepared by keeping enough OIL – and FIVE OTHERS are NOT READY¹ ...

He talks about a WICKED SERVANT who GROSSLY mistreats those who work for him ... When the MASTER or the BIG BOSS returns – UNANNOUNCED – the misanthropic servant is NOT READY² ...

He speaks of a homeowner who – HAD HE realized at what hour a thief would target his property – would have MADE IT A POINT to be READY.³

“Keep alert! ... Stay awake! ... BE READY! ... Change out of your PAJAMAS! ... Straighten your tie ... Lace your boots ... Something’s coming! Get ready!”

We find teachings like these SPRINKLED liberally throughout the New Testament ... anticipating Jesus’ SECOND COMING ...

We’ve ALSO seen examples of HUMAN PREPARATION for Jesus’ first coming in the pages immediately preceding this account – as God sends word to a faithful, elderly couple, that they will conceive a child who’s got a role in God’s BIG DRAMA ... and, just three months later, sends word to a faithful young virgin in Nazareth – that she will conceive by the Holy Spirit ... that her child will be called Son of the MOST HIGH.

These human players in God’s PLAN spend nine months GETTING READY for the first breath-gasp of the next phase ... another beginning in the PAGEANT of God’s gracious salvation.

AND THEN ... 30 years of relative silence, as God prepares these two vital men ... Jesus, the Son of God, and John – whom we know as the BAPTIZER ... FORERUNNER for Messiah Jesus.

¹ Matthew 25.1-13

² Matthew 24.45-51

³ Luke 12.35-40

In quietness, across the decades depicted in the first two chapters of this gospel, God has been preparing his servants for the role they will play ... and NOW they will PREPARE the WAY for God's work in the world ...

John's DEBUT, as it were, follows the script of the Old Testament prophets. His career is dated according to the year of the king's reign – the list of POLITICOS at the start of the passage; his identity is established by his ancestry ("son of Zechariah"); and he receives the prophetic message from God ... the SAME, 3-fold PATTERN exhibited with Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Jonah, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah.⁴

From the first moment, God DECLARES that John's DESTINY will involve preparation ... At the announcement of John's impending BIRTH, Gabriel tells Zechariah that John will "make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (1.16-17).

In Zechariah's SONG at the circumcision of the child, he celebrates (1.76-77): "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways ..."

Let's focus briefly on how God prepares his servant – and how God calls PEOPLE to PREPARE for God's next movement ...

At the end of chapter 1 (1.80) we learn that during YOUTH, John disappears into the wilderness until LAUNCH TIME for his ministry ... So his PERSONAL preparation takes shape in the barren, rocky wilderness – out of the public eye ...

Although chapter 3 begins with a long list of famous people – kings and governors and religious officials ... power brokers of the first century – God used this UNTITLED man, probably orphaned by this time, WITHOUT HEIR ... as the primary human instrument⁵ in getting the ground ready for the SALVATION SOWER ... and ultimately, for spiritual HARVEST.

I love how Luke phrases it in v. 4 ... It's not that JOHN COMES ... instead, the WORD OF THE LORD comes to John⁶ ... God is the ACTOR; John responds ...

Importantly, the word of the Lord comes to John in the WILDERNESS ... not in the temple, not in a seminary class ... not when he has "done" something to DESERVE it ... God's word came to John WHERE HE WAS ...

GOD has been preparing the PREPARER ... quietly ... over a long-enough period of time that SOME of those who heard the promise may have forgotten or lost hope ... God has come out of God's GRACE not due to the servant's WORTHINESS ...

In my mind's eye, John the Baptizer was so bold that he never FLINCHED from speaking God's word. Scripture tells us he spoke the truth to power – one of the most difficult challenges any human can face ... he even calls some of his first hearers (identified elsewhere as members of the religious establishment) a "brood of vipers!" ... Not exactly pastoral.

But I'm going to guess that if even Jesus found himself feeling "NOT READY" to carry out the tough part of his call as he knelt in the garden of Gethsemane ... even the BRAZEN Baptizer may have felt the internal JELLO SLOSH ...

⁴ Mark Strauss, "Luke," in Clinton E. Arnold, ed. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Volume 1*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002, p. 351.

⁵ R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections," in Leander Keck, ed., *New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995, p. 81.

⁶ Walter L. Liefeld, "Luke," in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed., *Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984, p. 854.

Scripture doesn't convey what John felt ... it shares only what he said and did ... And he went boldly (whether ready or not) to fulfill what he believed God was calling him to do ... what God had prepared him to do even before he was born.

AT THIS POINT, we discover God's message for the PEOPLE ...

Going into all the region around the Jordan, John brings his message – embodying and fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah:

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight ...

The statement reflects Near Eastern imagery of clearing the path for a royal figure. Only a smooth, straight road is appropriate for a king. The imagery is metaphorical, referring to a people spiritually and morally prepared to welcome their Lord.⁷

But listen, too, to the remainder in v. 5: *Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hills shall be made low ... and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh (not just the Jews) shall see the salvation of God ...*

Every valley shall be filled ... every mountain and hill be made low ... Do you hear what he's saying? He's saying that what seems like it cannot be changed – what could NEVER be changed – WILL be changed.

All of us can feel tempted to SILENCE God's call to a new way of life by appealing to BACK STORY ... John says that to get ready for God, we can't hide behind EXCUSES of how it's always been ... *Oh, I never had a chance like other people ... You know, my MOTHER was like that, too ... I started drinking when I was 14 ... My family's not really into all that religious stuff ...*

John calls his hearers to GET READY for God's new movement ... to STOP CHASING after sin and TURN AROUND ... and since, as the other Synoptics point out that so many religious folks populate John's audience ... he's also saying, "Don't rely on your scripture knowledge to be enough ... Turn around your living as a way of showing openness to God's movement – reflect it in the way you treat your neighbors and care for the poor ... Going to synagogue, going to church ain't gonna cut it ... God is BREAKING FORTH with a new thing ... Get ready!"

Repentance – a turn-around – MARKS the first step in READINESS.

FROM WHAT do we need to turn as we PREPARE for the arrival of God's gracious love? ... THIS is our moment ...

I'm reminded of a SONG LYRIC from my childhood -- WRITTEN by Smokey Robinson and showcased here in a clip from the movie, "The Temptations." I offer it to help you REMEMBER the call this week.⁸

(1:27 clip of song "Get Ready" from the movie The Temptations. The chorus: "I'm bringing you a love that's true. So get ready, so get ready. I'm gonna try to make you love me too. So get ready, so get ready 'cause here I come.)

Friends, the call remains the same: God is bringing SOMETHING GOOD our way ... Let's LET GO of how it's always been ... Let's GET READY.

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⁷ Strauss, p. 354.

⁸ *The Temptations*, 1998. Written by Robert Johnson and Kevin Arkadie; directed by Allan Arkush. Not rated, made-for-TV film. Film excerpts are used by permission, CVLI License 501850140. Community Presbyterian takes care to utilize film segments that are suitable for all ages. It does not, however, endorse the wider content of any film.