

Rev. Dr. Camille Cook Howe
Advent 2
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

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Luke 3:1-6
Detour Ahead

Sometimes a movie begins by showing you a glimpse of what will happen later on. Then it returns to the beginning, and you watch the rest of the movie with that little piece of insight into the future. John the Baptist appears in Advent as this flash into the future. Before we read the story of Mary learning that she will bear a son, we see John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness about that son. Before we read the nativity story about the birth in Bethlehem, we meet John preaching about preparing ourselves to meet this man, Jesus. John the Baptist is our annual visitor reminding us that this is all a really, big deal. Don't be lulled by the Christmas jingles playing in the shops. This holiday isn't some dressed up baby shower. This is about the arrival of the Savior of the world, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. The long anticipated, much needed savior of the world is coming – get ready!

Two basic things have happened in the narrative in Luke's gospel when we meet John the Baptist. The first thing is that Mary finds out she is going to have a baby and then Jesus is born. Then Jesus is presented to the temple as a baby, and it was said his parents were told how great he was going to be. Then Jesus is twelve and goes to Jerusalem for Passover and instead of returning home he sticks around the temple and causes his parents utter panic until they find him again. These are the only scenes we get from Jesus' childhood before we meet him as a grown man, before John lets the world know they better prepare themselves to meet him. John does his preaching and then Jesus is baptized and then the rest is history – the miracles, the teachings, the temptations, the call of the disciples, the torture, the death, the resurrection. Thirty some years of Jesus' life have passed before we meet him on the bank of River Jordan.

Advent is about Jesus, but this Sunday, the second Sunday in Advent, is about John, the cousin to Jesus, the one who predicted and preached about the impact of his life, and the one who baptized Jesus, the one who was subsequently imprisoned and killed for his association with Jesus and his anti-establishment behavior. You can't say enough about how important John is to the Christian faith. Add him to the short list of people you'd invite to a dinner party if you got such a wish.

As Luke writes the story of John the Baptist, he places it in the context of the secular history. Luke names important figures of the time to contextualize things, seven authority figures to be precise. Because of the specificity of these names, we can place John the Baptist in the time between 28-29 CE. This would be like beginning a story by saying 'Barack Obama was the President and Joe Biden was the Vice President. Erik Holder was the Attorney General. Chuck Hagel was the Secretary of Defense. Susan Rice was the ambassador to the United Nations. Vincent Gray was the Mayor of the District of Columbia. And Jack Evans was the D.C. Council member for Ward 2. That is seven authority figures named to locate something specific in history and with those seven figures we could get close to the time of when they overlapped, and something specific had happened. If you were around here when those people were in office, then those names call certain things to mind. About what they were doing as leaders, or what was happening in the country, or what was happening in your own life.

This is exactly what Luke is doing – calling to mind for the readers a particular time in history, a time they lived through, a time that was particularly awful. All of this was going on and then there is the cry wilderness.

There is a significant contrast being made between all these authority figures with this unknown man named John. These people in power, doing fancy things, in fancy places contrasted with a no name. And yet do you know anything about the policies or practices of Philip the Son of Herod the Great? Of course not. Yet John – we know things about him. We know what he was like and what he wore and what he ate and most important what he did and who he came before. John was the important person in this story. The irony of these powerful men being trumped by John, the man with no title, no palace, no money. Yet John knew he was important for one reason only, his association with Jesus. He knew he was not worthy to untie Jesus' sandals.

The Interpreter's Bible Commentary writes, "John is linked with associations that will live as long as religion lives. The man whose greatness was that of conditions and circumstance fades, the man whose greatness was in character endures."

This is such a lesson for us in Washington, we love to make the fancy people, the policy makers and elected officials and the media the voices of truth and life. We turn to the modern equivalents of Emperor Tiberius, and Pontius Pilate, and Caiaphas looking for answers, seeking guidance. Tell us the truth Tucker Carson, preach us the news Wolf Blitzer, give us a steer for the day Lester Holt. Politics and pop culture and social trends become the things we follow religiously.

In October, The Atlantic had an article by Peter Wehner, titled *The Evangelical Church is Breaking Apart*. He talks about how the church has failed to do a good job at teaching good theology to its folks. Yet the culture, teaches us all day long what to think and feel and believe.

"Culture catechizes," Alan Jacobs, a distinguished professor of humanities at Baylor University, told me. Culture teaches us what matters and what views we should take about what matters. Our current political culture, Jacobs argued, has multiple technologies and platforms for catechizing—television, radio, Facebook, Twitter, and podcasts among them. People who want to be connected to their political tribe—the people they think are like them, the people they think are on their side—subject themselves to its catechesis all day long, every single day, hour after hour after hour. On the flip side, many churches aren't interested in catechesis at all. They focus instead on entertainment, because entertainment is what keeps people in their seats and coins in the offering plate.

But as Jacobs points out, even those pastors who really are committed to catechesis get to spend, on average, less than an hour a week teaching their people. Sermons are short. Only some churchgoers attend adult-education classes, and even fewer attend Bible study and small groups. Cable news, however, is always on. "So if people are getting one kind of catechesis for half an

hour per week,” Jacobs asked, “and another for dozens of hours per week, which one do you think will win out?”

John the Baptist was teaching a catechism. People in the city were leaving the noise behind to seek out this preacher in the wilderness who had something new to say. John’s catechism was counter to the cultural catechism being taught by the Roman Empire. It was a catechism of loving neighbors and sharing resources and shunning idols and repenting from sin and seeking lives of meaning. His was a lone voice crying out in the wilderness. He was preaching about repenting of the sins in their lives and starting new lives. He was preaching that Jesus was coming and people needed to get their lives in order.

John the Baptist came at a particular point in history to shake things up and announce grown-up Jesus being unleashed on the world. And John the Baptist comes to us, at a particular season of our lives, the second Sunday of Advent, when things are really kicking up. We are too busy to be nice, we are too stressed to be spiritual, we are too materialistic to be generous, we are too scared to be compassionate. And John calls us to knock it off. Stop behaving like people who haven’t heard how this story ends. That Jesus came to save us from all this madness and liberate us from the cultural, and political, and social chains that bind. So why are we still behaving like their prisoners?

John calls us to repent and turn away from the ways world. To return to the church. To return to the Word. To return to prayer. To return to repentance. To return to lives of faith. John the Baptist calls us out of our ways. John the Baptist calls us to turn to the Way and the Truth and the Life of Jesus Christ.

W.H. Auden’s poem for the Time Being, is one that I have loved and one that I could hear being preached by John the Baptist. This poem is a calling for all who find themselves in the wilderness, for all who find themselves in Advent:

*He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.*

*He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.*

*He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.*

John is only the pointer. John’s Gospel says, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light. He himself was not the light. The true light,

which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” John the Baptist’s job was to point others to the light of God.

May he point us there again. May he startle us awake. May he remind us of the good news in the world. May he enable us to make this season count. May he help us to believe that Jesus is real, and Jesus is true, and Jesus is enough. Amen.