



The Herald of Christmas Speaks

Luke 3:1-20

Icebreaker

As you begin the discussion portion of your group, take a few minutes to break the ice and get everyone talking. Either use these questions or come up with your own.

1. **What is your favorite Christmas song?**
2. **When was the last time you got lost? How do you find your way?**

Series Overview

Week 4 of our Advent series this year will be focusing on the life and ministry of John the Baptist. John ministered briefly, calling a nation to repent, to turn back to covenant faithfulness, to show care for those in need rather than for themselves, and to be ready for God's coming judgment. John never pointed to himself, but always pointed ahead to a coming One who was more worthy than he.

Join us for the final two weeks of our advent series as we see how John the Baptist was the herald of Christmas. It is through the life of John the Baptist that the way to Jesus was prepared. Join us as we unlock important themes such as pointing to Jesus, waiting for the Lord, and how a great man and prophet pointed us to someone greater than himself. Ultimately we will learn that we too are to point others to Christ this season.

Context

Luke provided a lot of background information on John the Baptist's family and the circumstances of his birth. Here, Luke described John's ministry and connection to Jesus.

We now move into the story proper, and it begins, as chapter 1 led us to expect, not with Jesus but rather with John, the forerunner. At 3:21 the focus will turn to Jesus, but John's call to repentance, and the considerable impact that it had on public opinion, will remain in the background of Jesus's own ministry. In many ways Jesus will be, as he was popularly perceived to be, the successor to John, and Jesus himself will emphasize the pivotal importance of John's ministry (7:24–28).

Historical and Cultural Background

In 3:1–2, Luke is keen to set the story of Jesus in its wider historical context within Roman and Jewish history. The date that he describes is probably AD 28/29 (depending on how the beginning of Tiberius's reign is calculated). The "Herod" who is now tetrarch of Galilee (and Perea) is Herod Antipas, the son of the "King Herod" of 1:5; all subsequent references to "Herod" in the Gospel (3:19–20; 8:3; 9:7–9; 13:31; 23:7–12) are to Antipas.

The historical significance of John the Baptist is shown by the fact that the Jewish historian Josephus devotes more space to him than to Jesus. His account is similar to Luke's, but he attributes Antipas's action to the political threat that he perceived in John, as a popular leader with a volatile following.

Ritual purification was important in Judaism, but normally on a continuing basis before each act of worship, not as a one-time rite of initiation. John's innovative practice may have been modeled on the baptism that non-Jews were required to undergo in order to become Jewish proselytes (though some argue that this practice originated later).

Key Themes of Luke 3:1–20

- **John's baptism is a symbol of repentance and a new beginning.**
- **He fulfills Isaiah's prophecy of one who would prepare for God's coming.**
- **His baptism challenges Jews not to rely on their Jewishness for salvation.**
- **True repentance leads to a practical change of life.**
- **John's revival movement is highly significant, but he himself is not the Messiah.**
- **His fearless confrontation of Herod Antipas leads to his imprisonment.**

Passage

Out loud, read Luke 3:1-20

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 And 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 Isaiah the prophet,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Prepare 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 become straight,

and the rough places shall become level ways,

6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

7 He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have

Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 9 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

10 And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?"

11 And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." 12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do."

14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

15 As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, 16 John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

18 So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. 19 But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, 20 added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

Discuss

- 1. Consider (vv. 1–3): Why are these historical details so valuable today?**
- 2. Consider (vv. 7–14): How would you summarize the basic theme of John's message? What made this message radical for John's time and culture? Based on these verses, what are some instructions John might give to an audience looking for spiritual guidance today?**

3. **Consider (vv. 15–20): What images did John use in his descriptions of Jesus? What do those images communicate about Jesus?**
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5. **What are some ways you can prepare to go in the way of the Lord?**
6. **As you look at the path you are on ... are you going in the way of Jesus?**
7. **As we go through these dark times, how can you let Jesus's life shine in your community?**
8. **How can you point others to the Lord this Advent season?**

Next Steps

At the end of your time together, allow five minutes of silent contemplation. Think of it as your permission to do nothing but sit at Jesus's feet. Contemplate the following question:

- **What can you do to prepare the way for Christ to move into your life this season?**
- Spend time praying and repenting and asking Jesus to help you go in the way He wants you to go.
- Apply: Who are some spiritual trailblazers you've come to admire? What is one step you can take this week to produce "fruit consistent with repentance"?

John is is a great model for the modern Christian today. Note, for example:

- His unwillingness to curry favor ("You brood of vipers"),
- His challenge to entrenched assumptions about who are really God's people.
- His consistent pointing away from himself (just "a voice") to the one he prepares for.
- His insistence that repentance must be more than just words.
- His radical social ethics.
- His refusal to be silent about the moral scandal of the most powerful man in the land.

Can you add other ways in which John is an example to follow?

As you close your group time, end with prayer for one another and for those around you.

Family Component

Be sure to check out our website for activities to do this week with your family.

Reading Plan

For further reading look for the reading plan at:

<https://cornerstonenj.org/2020/11/23/herald-of-christmas-reading-plan/>