Sermon Luke 3:1-6, December 8, 2024
"Good News in Bad Times"

The most important day of our lives is the day we trust Christ as Savior. After 400 years, the world needed good news, a word from God. In a world of darkness, the word of God came to John, and that is what this world needs! This is what America needs—a word from God: "Good news in bad times" to counter the moral decline of this nation, problems like abortion, pornography, widespread sexual immorality, and the prohibition of any Christian expression in public schools.

Anyone involved in ministry requires a special call from God, a solid inner sense that God has called us to work to proclaim God's Word. What the world needs most is not a political solution to fix society's rampant evils. No. The preaching of the gospel is clearly God's solution.

Luke begins this new section that introduces the ministry of Jesus Christ with a forerunner, John the Baptist, who started to preach. In the gospel of Matthew 11:11, Jesus said of John the Baptist, saying, "Among those born of women, no one has risen **greater than** John the Baptist, and yet, for some odd reason, John is almost entirely ignored by modern believers as if told as a stray story of oddity. In a genuine sense, he was the first Christian, the first Christian witness, the first Christian preacher, the first Christian prophet, and the first Christian martyr. He was the first to baptize converts and could have even started the first local church.

This account sheds a beam of light on the office of all ministers of the Gospel, an office no person has a right to take up unless there is an inward call from God to the ministry. The word of God must "come to him or her," as it came to John the Baptist, moved by the Holy Spirit. How can one testify of a Savior whom one has never seen by faith or laid hands on? Well, I am here to tell you that the *Good News in bad times* is to tell others about Him, and obedience to God is the key to a lasting influence. When times are bad, the message we need is the good news of God's salvation. Let's pray.

Eternal God, we have a unique relationship with you, a deal based on a covenant that you have established with us based upon what Jesus did for us, a covenant of grace, unmerited favor. We don't stand before you condemned; we are before you, Lord, free and chosen by you. Lord, to enjoy your presence and truths.

Here we are in the gospel of Luke. Luke, by tradition, was a doctor and a Gentile, but he had this spirit of God in him. He wrote about the climax of salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ and about a crazy man emerging from the dangers of the wilderness who has lit out on a career of fire-and-brimstone preaching. But how could someone defined as "great" have such a short ministry? The answer. Simply because his life counted on what God had given him. He made it count for the glory of the Lord. In heaven, that's a great life that is well-lived. What you might not know is that John would have been a priest. His dad, Zacharias, served as a priest in the temple when the angel Gabriel spoke to him that his wife, Elizabeth, though old, was going to have a child.

So here is John, the cousin of Jesus, a few months older than Jesus, and we should marvel at how God calls people, what He sets them to do, and where He sends them. I love John the Baptist because he is unusual, as if he steps out of the pages of the Old Testament and steps right into the New Testament. In fact, Luke tells us in chapter 16 that John was the last of the Prophets and, since that time, the good news of the new covenant has been preached. Here is John, similar to the fire-and-brimstone prophets of the ancient world, stepping into the New Testament.

Luke's writing introducing John the Baptist is essential for us to understand. John is a pivotal figure in history for what is happening in Rome, the Temple, and Israel. Luke begins listing seven so-to-speak VIPs figures of importance in the religious and political world. There was Emperor Tiberius, the most powerful man in the world, and then Caiaphas, the only priest privileged to enter into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. The hinge of history comes not to these men.

Instead, the word of God came to John, a man whose only distinction is that the word of God has come to him. The word of God did not happen in Rome, Jerusalem, or the temple but in the wilderness. Imagine a guy, a hippie from the wilderness, who eats wild oats and honey. An unlikely person who reminds us that God chooses unlikely people. How odd to choose John. Those of us in ministry wonder at our calling, whether a layperson or pastor. I thank God for this story and its reminder of my calling to preach the gospel.

In this past year, I was introduced to a Greek word that involves changing one's mind, turning around, and proceeding in a new direction: *metanoias*. If Advent is a time of preparation for the Lord so that "all flesh will see God's salvation" (v.6), **we find in verse 3** the way to prepare: bearing fruit worthy of

repentance, sharing with those in need, dealing with people honestly, and using power justly. And so, John arrives on the scene, calling for repentance. A change in direction, turning from worldly compulsions to Godly affections. It is the heart of the message. People still need forgiveness, and God still forgives. People know they are sinners. Scripture teaches that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." If there is no sin, there is no need for forgiveness," but all flesh will see god's salvation.

In our churches, we must be careful not to give people the impression that the most critical work of the church is meeting easily measured goals, like a budget or programming. No, the real goal is to prepare hearts to receive the Lord, which is a challenging goal to measure. The work of the church takes place in less visible ways, less measurable, and that is the work of the Holy Spirit. How do we contribute? We contribute to the Spirit's work in many ways, especially by prayer and by preparing our hearts to receive the Lord. And so it is that just as the prophet called the people of Israel to prepare for the
Lord's visitation, we, too, need to follow the Lord's instructions to help our families and friends prepare their hearts well.

During the season of Advent, it can be easy to lose focus and forget that Jesus' birth took place in the middle of nowhere, in the least likely of places. What would that day have looked like had there been, at that time in 30 A.D., some equivalent of some website like CNN or Fox News? On the page "Breaking News," a picture of King Herod receiving the delegation from Caesar in his regal throne room. Off to the right is another list of the day's "Hot Topics," including news bulletins from Rome or Asia Minor, all of which got my mind on a roll.

I could go even further back in time, sitting around the radio listening to the broadcast voices of Walter Cronkite or Paul Harvey, who dominated the AM radio dial. I can hear the teletype in the background punching out the words "Top Stories," like politics, sports, entertainment, Health, and Justice. Then, the teletype punches out the category of "Oddments." Paul Harvey loved the oddities of world news, telling the rest of the story. You know, the backstories behind famous people and events. I can hear his voice: Breaking news, an oddity from Bethlehem: Defying the natural laws of human experience, a baby is born in a manger to a lowly maiden named Mary.

While stationed in Italy, I remember Paul Harvey's 1965 re-broadcast over Armed Forces Radio titled, "If I Were the Devil." Harvey saw the future spiritual

condition of the United States, and at that time, his statements were considered radically outlandish in history; only that is where we find ourselves today. **Here is his transcript.** "If I were the devil, the Prince of Darkness, I'd want to engulf the whole world in darkness. I'd have a third of its real estate and four-fifths of its population, but I wouldn't be happy until I had seized the ripest apple on the tree-Thee. So, I'd set about however necessary to take over the United States. I'd subvert churches first with a campaign of whispers.

With the wisdom of a serpent, I would whisper to you as I whispered to Eve: Do as you please. To the young, I would whisper that the Bible is a myth. I would convince them that man created God instead of the other way around. I would confide that what's bad is good, and what's good is square. And the old, I would teach to pray after me these words. Our Father, which art in Washington.

Then, I would get organized. I'd educate authors on how to make lurid literature exciting so that anything else would appear dull and uninteresting; I'd threaten TV with dirtier movies and vice versa. I'd pedal narcotics to whom I could and sell alcohol to ladies and gentlemen of distinction and tranquilize the rest with pills.

If I were the devil, I'd soon have families at war with themselves, churches at war with themselves, and nations at war until each, in its turn, was consumed. And with promises of higher ratings, I'd have mesmerizing media fanning the flames. If I were the devil, I would encourage schools to refine young intellects but neglect to discipline emotions, just let those run wild, until before you knew it, you'd have to have drug-sniffing dogs and metal detectors at every schoolhouse door.

Within a decade, I'd have prisons overflowing and judges promoting pornography, and then soon I could evict God from the courthouse, then from the schoolhouse, and then from the houses of Congress. And in His own churches, I would substitute psychology for religion and deify science. I would lure priests and pastors into misusing boys and girls and church money. If I were the devil, I would work to convince the young that marriage is old-fashioned and swinging is more fun, that what you see on the TV is the way to be. And thus, I could undress you in public, and I could lure you into bed with diseases for which there is no cure. If I were the devil, I'd make symbols of an Easter egg and the symbol of Christmas a bottle. If I were the devil, I'd take from those who have and give to those who want until I had killed the incentive of the ambitious. And what do you bet I could get

whole states to promote gambling as the way to get rich? In other words, if I were the devil, I'd keep right on doing what he's doing." Paul Harvey, (long pause) Good day.

It should break our hearts to see Harvey's prophesy of the future spiritual condition come to life. How will those with the spirit of darkness see God's salvation? We are reminded that our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the power of this dark world, and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. We must decide to be different and Christ-focused. What offends God should offend us, for what breaks the Lord's heart should break ours, too. What He loves, we should love. During this season of Advent and the joy of Christmas, the world desperately needs Jesus, and we know He is the answer. He is the answer to the challenges in our families, our nation, and our world.

As I close, John the Baptist called out from the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord," and as I stand here today, preparing for the birth of our Savior, no longer is there only one single voice crying out to Prepare the way of the Lord, but the many of us called to the ministry of the gospel following a special call from God to spread the good news. I say the same thing to all of you as we hold fast to the faithful Word of life. Let us not give in to the whispers of the devil, for this little oddment, a baby born from a virgin Mother, born in a cattle trough from an odd and lowly place. The best news in bad times is that it has been written, "And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 12:1). And now you know (pause) a piece of the story. Amen