

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 3:1-6

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

This story has basically two voices. One is the voice of the storyteller as a historian describing the political context of the ministry of John the Baptist. The second is the voice of Isaiah who wrote these words some 600-800 years before John the Baptist whose prophecy is being fulfilled in John's ministry. Thus, it may be a good idea in the telling of the story to distinguish the voices of the storyteller-historian Luke, who is speaking directly to the audience as his listeners, and of Isaiah speaking to the community of Israel in a much earlier period but also now speaking through the storyteller to the people of the late first century.

This story is the introduction of John the Baptist in Luke. It is the culmination of the hopes of the people of Israel for a prophet who will announce and establish the kingdom of God. John's presence and proclamation are good news about the coming of the Kingdom of God. His vision is a great and broad road that will provide a clear path for the forces of the kingdom of God to establish power. The vision of this road is that the torturous paths will be made straight and the valleys will be filled and every mountain and hill made low. The vision is a Roman road or in our time a big railroad track where everything is leveled. Isaiah's vision is of a broad road carved through the wilderness on which the forces of God would be able to establish the kingdom of God by traveling down this great road. It is not coincidence that this vision follows the list of all the politicians who will need to be dealt with by the government of God in order to establish a new period of history and a new kingdom. All of the great empires of the ancient world built great roads, supremely the Romans.

This story takes place during the reign of Emperor Tiberius in Rome and then of his appointed governor the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate, and Herod, who was the ruler of Galilee. That Herod was Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, and his brother Philip, who was also a son of Herod the Great and Thesanius, all of whom were vassal kings appointed by the Romans to carry out Roman administration and deliver taxes to the Roman Empire.

It was also the time of the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. We know of Annas and Caiaphas because they become major figures in the trial of Jesus (John 15:13) and were the rulers of the government of Judea as high priests. The high priesthood was not just about being priests in the Temple. High priests ran everything in Jerusalem and Judea under the rule of the governors, the kings, Pontius Pilate and Tiberius. Luke here describes the hierarchy of power in the days of John and Jesus.

In this list we have a description of the structures of power in the days of John the Baptist. This vision of the coming of the Kingdom of God also outlines the political issues that were present for John the Baptist and that eventually resulted in his death.

That is, John the Baptist does not back down from naming the realities of power to the structures of government in his age. The prophecy of Isaiah is an introduction to the ministry of John the Baptist and his proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God in the coming of the Messiah. This is the beginning of the good news of the establishment of a new balance of power in the world.