

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

Luke 3:1-20

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):

Year C - Advent 2, Text: Luke 3:1-14 (15-20)

RCL (Revised Common Lectionary): Year C - Advent 2 and 3, Texts: Luke 3:1-6, and Luke 3:7-18

Editor's Note: *Wendt's commentaries for Advent 2 (RCL Luke 3:1-6) and Advent 3 (RCL Luke 3:7-22) are here combined to cover the LSB text (Luke 3:1-20).*

In his prologue (Luke 1:1–4), Luke states that, in writing his Gospel (“an orderly account”), he drew on information handed down by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. This prologue is followed by Luke’s unique introductory materials (Luke 1:5–2:52) that deal with the births of both John the Baptist and Jesus, and Jesus’ early years. Next, Luke launches his “orderly account” about Jesus’ adult years (chs. 3–24).

Verse 3:1: Tiberius (a stepson of Caesar Augustus) succeeded Augustus as emperor of Rome in AD 14 and ruled until AD 37. The 15th year of his reign would have been AD 28 or 29 according to Roman reckoning, or AD 27 according to the system followed in Syria. After Herod the Great died in 4 BC, his territory was divided among three of his sons. Archelaus ruled Judea and Samaria until he was deposed AD 6 (in response to a joint petition by both Jews and Samaritans) and Roman procurators assumed control of the territory that he had ruled.

Pontius Pilate served as prefect of Judea and Samaria from AD 26 to 36. The Jewish historian Josephus describes Pilate as a greedy and ruthless ruler who had little regard for the local Jewish population and their religious practices.

Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea from 4 BC until AD 39. Although his official title, *tetrarch*, means “ruler of a quarter,” it designated a subordinate prince. Philip, also a son of Herod the Great, served as tetrarch of the territory to the north and east of the Sea of Galilee from 4 BC until AD 34. Luke refers to only two small areas of Philip’s territory: Iturea and Trachonitis. Philip was the best ruler and most moderate of Herod the Great’s family. In later life, he married Salome (30 years his junior) soon after she demanded the head of John the Baptist in response to her moth-

er’s instructions (Mark 6:14–29). Philip died childless. Nothing is known about Lysanias, who is here said to have served as tetrarch of Abilene, a region to the northwest of Damascus.

Verse 3:2: The word of the Lord came to John the Baptist (son of Zechariah) in the desert during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. Annas had served as high priest AD 6 to 15. After he was deposed by the Romans in AD 15, Annas made sure that five of his sons, a grandson, and a son-in-law (Caiaphas) exercised supreme religious jurisdiction. Caiaphas served as high priest AD 18 to 36. The office of high priest was sold by Roman officials to the highest bidder. Luke refers to Annas as “high priest” still at this time — possibly because of the continuing influence of Annas, or because the title continued to be used by an ex-high priest.

Luke presents the call of John the Baptist in a manner that reflects the call of Old Testament prophets, and extends the quotation in Mark 1:3 (from Isaiah 40:3) by adding Isaiah 40:4–5. Unlike Luke, Matthew 3:1ff says nothing about John the Baptist’s origins, and does not suggest that John was a relative of Jesus.

Verse 3:3: John’s parents were Zacharias, a priest, and Elizabeth, both descendants of Levi. Hence, John could have joined the staff of the Jerusalem Temple as a professional priest. Instead, he carried out his prophetic ministry in all the region around the Jordan. The overtones of John following his calling are significant. He bypasses the Jerusalem Temple’s “sin management system,” its “salvation marketing system,” and proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The fact that Jews from Judea and Jerusalem (Mark 1:5) went to John to be baptized is significant. Perhaps some of them suspected that the Temple system was corrupt and were looking for some new way to get right with God and influence the nation.

Verses 3:4–6: John proclaims that the final age of the world is at hand. In the larger section of Luke 3:1–20, John urges the crowds to repent in view of the coming wrath (verses 7–9), offers them standards for reforming social conduct (verses 10–14), and announces to the crowds the coming of One mightier than he (verses 15–18; note the messianic tones). The “salvation of God” (referred to in 3:6) is declared to be evident for all to see, perhaps in contrast to the empty claims of other gods and rulers to be “saviors” (see Isaiah 45:20–23).

Note: The Essenes from Qumran used this same passage (Isaiah 40:3–5) to explain why their community was in the desert studying and observing the law and the prophets (The Manual of Discipline, 1QS 8:12–15).

Verses 3:7–9: John summons his hearers to go in spirit out into the desert. There, with Moses (Exodus 3) and Isaiah (Isaiah 40–55), they would find the revelation of God’s glory. They must not be like vipers, desert creatures that slither over the sand and carry poison in their system. Unlike dry scrub bushes, their life must bear fruit in works of justice, mercy, and servanthood.

Luke here records a genuine memory of the Baptist’s preaching. The metaphors come from the desert: vipers, stones, barren trees. Luke usually edits out of his source words such as “vipers” — he deliberately omits this term from the preaching of Jesus (Mark 12:34; Luke 6:43–45).

John calls for repentance (*metanoia*, a new mind, a change of heart). Playing upon the Hebrew or Aramaic words for stones (*‘abanim* or *‘abnayyah*) and children (*banim* or *banniyah*), John calls for internal holiness, not a focus on ethnic descent. God could create the spirit of Abraham more easily in a humble Gentile or a penitent sinner than in a proud Jew. John wants a sincere, total turning to the Lord; a mere reception of John’s baptism as a ritual is not sufficient. “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree”; this is the day of final decisions that will result in either abundant blessings or irretrievable losses.

Verses 3:10–14: Different groups of people ask John “What shall we do ...?” These verses are found only in Luke. They refer to John as the balanced guide of sincere souls. John asks for fundamental things — as did the prophets before him: compassionate almsgiv-

ing from everyone, and justice from tax collectors and soldiers. Two tunics (an undergarment that is less necessary than the indispensable outer one) are to be shared with the destitute. Tax collectors (publicans) who paid Rome for the “privilege” of collecting taxes were despised by their fellow Jews. John does not demand that they quit their jobs, but that they reform their morals. While Mark and John see the Baptist chiefly as a witness to Jesus, Matthew and Luke see him as a teacher of righteousness.

Verses 3:15–17: In his teaching, John the Baptist strives to make his hearers admit how humble and poor they really are and how desperately they need salvation. In doing so, he directs their eyes to Jesus the Messiah, Who will be “more powerful” than John.

This last phrase points to the expected eschatological Deliverer, the One Who will appear at the eschaton or final day. The Messiah’s baptism will be with “the Holy Spirit and fire,” terms for the power of God’s presence that burns away dross and ignites the fire of love. Not only will Jesus refer to His passion as a “baptism” (Mark 10:38–39), but Paul will refer to Christian baptism as a participation in the passion and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6).

Verses 3:18–20: Luke admits that he has summarized John’s preaching on numerous occasions. Then, in customary style, he completes the scene by recording John’s future arrest by Herod Antipas, and his imprisonment in the Machaerus, a fortress to the northeast of the Dead Sea in the region of Perea. Antipas had recently married Herodias, the former wife of Philip — but a different Philip than “the tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis.”

Verses 3:21–22: Luke separates the ministry of John the Baptist from that of Jesus by reporting John’s imprisonment before the baptism of Jesus. There is reason to believe that Luke does this to show his understanding of the periods of salvation history. With John the Baptist, the time of promise, the period of “Old Israel,” comes to an end. With the baptism of Jesus and the descent of the Spirit upon Him, the time of fulfillment, the time of Jesus, begins. In his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke will introduce the third epoch of salvation history: the period of the church.