

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

By the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, Founder of Crossways International

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

Luke 3:15-22

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book): Year C - Ep. 1 (Baptism of the Lord), Text: Luke 3:15-22
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary): Year C - Ep. 1 (Baptism of the Lord), Text Lk. 3:15-17, 21, 22

The contents of Luke 3:1–18 were dealt with in the insights offered for Advent 2. However, 3:15–17 resurfaces in the present pericope, and Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism (3:21, 22) is added.

The background to today’s selection is huge. In the preceding chapters, we learn about Zechariah and Elizabeth (a virtual outcast) being promised a child, the annunciation to Mary, Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, the birth of John the Baptist, Jesus’ birth, the proclamation of the angels, the visit of the shepherds, and Jesus’ visit to the Temple.

Some prominent names are listed in Luke 3:1–2: Emperor Tiberius, Governor Pilate, Herod and Philip, Annas, and Caiaphas. Jesus’ ministry will have implications for all people — for those in positions of power as well as for the lowly. Although John the Baptist could have had a prestigious job as a Temple priest, we find him out in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He proclaims a new beginning to the history of God’s people — a new and final Exodus (Luke 3:4–6).

John addresses his audience in terms that few preachers would dare use today. He addresses them as a brood of vipers (!) that are fleeing from a coming, deserved judgment — as serpents slithering ahead of a grass fire. Their boasts about being descendants of Abraham are meaningless. If they do not repent, if they do not change their whole way of thinking and living, they will be cut down as a useless tree.

They are to share their clothing and food with the needy. The “money boys” (tax collectors) are to be scrupulously honest. The “military boys” are to be satisfied with their wages and must never resort to lies or threats to extract money from people. Is it not true that little has changed in our world, and that today’s humanity needs to hear John’s message as much as the people of his day did?

All these are powerful proclamations. How are we to get the truths embedded in them into human hearts today? Sadly, many in affluent countries prefer to hear a message that assures them that God wants them to enjoy a prosperous and so-called successful life. But Jesus never linked being “blessed” to what a person possesses and enjoys in a worldly sense. He who finished up on a cross naked, linked the term “blessed” only to those who take up their cross and follow him.

Verses 3:18–20: Luke reports John’s imprisonment by Herod Antipas. John had attacked Herod for marrying Herodias — who had divorced her previous husband Philip (a brother of Herod Antipas) so that she might marry Herod Antipas.

Verses 3:21–22: Two short verses that convey a huge message! Although v. 21 states that Jesus was baptized, it does not state that it was John the Baptist who performed that act. The other Gospels address that issue more specifically.

Isaiah 64:1, 2 expresses the hope that the day would come when God would tear open the heavens and come down to rescue His people. That hope finds fulfillment in Jesus’ incarnation and ministry.

Although Joel 2:28 expressed the hope that the day would come when God would pour out His spirit on all flesh (all within Israel). Joel 3 expressed the hope that the day would come when God would crush the Gentiles even as a person crushes grapes in a winepress. Jesus “edited” those expectations in a rather radical manner.

Finally, a voice speaks from the heavens. In Jesus’ day, rabbis believed that God spoke to His people through the Torah, through a prophetic voice, and through a heavenly voice. The heavenly voice that speaks on the occasion of Jesus’ baptism declared Him to be King and Servant. “You are my Son, the Beloved” is a quote from Psalm 2:7 — a coronation psalm; in Jesus, the Davidic dynasty is being restored to God’s people.

“With you I am well pleased” (Isaiah 42:1) is a quote from Isaiah’s first Servant Song.

The implications of the message of the voice from the cloud were enormous for the people of Jesus’ day, and remain so for God’s people (and all humanity!) still today. God’s Good News to us today has to do with more than being forgiven and assured of going to heaven. His Good News has to do with being forgiven “the old way” of life, and transformed to walk “the Jesus way” through life. How the world needs to listen, understand, believe, and respond!