



## **“Where Were You When It Happened?”**

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### **Scripture (NRSV):**

#### **Luke 3:1-6**

**3** In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler<sup>[a]</sup> of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler<sup>[b]</sup> of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler<sup>[c]</sup> of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup> as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;

<sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

### **Sermon:**

Do you remember where you were when the planes hit the Twin Towers?

Do you remember where you were when John Kennedy was shot? Bobby Kennedy? Martin Luther King?

How about when the Berlin Wall came down? Or more recently; when the power went out in the Big Wind Storm of Spokane?

Do you remember where you were when you found out you were going to have a baby?  
When you heard that a parent, or a dear friend, had died?

There are certain times that are burned into our memory. The day my dad died at my sister's house, outside of Santa Fe, fires had been raging all over New Mexico, the air had been foul with smoke. But on that morning, a sweet fresh breeze blew through the windows and he died with a beautiful view of the mountains he loved, a bright blue sky and fresh pinon scented air. It seemed a perfect miracle, and in the midst of our sadness, we his children, rejoiced that he had such a beautiful dying day.

I think Luke is trying to burn something into our memories, too, with his litany of famous men and their times of power; trying to set the stage for the coming of John, and the bursting on the world of Jesus in his power.

Historians still can't get an exact date, the ancient world used at least four different calendars: the Julian, Egyptian, Jewish and Syrian-Macedonian, and we just don't know exactly how Luke was calculating his times.

But on some level, it isn't about a precise date, (I have to wrack my brain for the exact day my Dad died) it is about remembering a powerful experience and letting it be the marker for the rest of your life.

So, Luke begins this chapter with some ancient chronology, and then adds in the Jewish language of prophetic call... "the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah". (Just like Jeremiah, or other of the prophets.)

And then come the words of the prophet Isaiah! How thrilling they are! How thrilling they must have been when heard in that age of foreign oppression, religious corruption, poverty, sickness and every sort of affliction!

"Prepare the way for the Lord...every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked be made straight and the rough ways smooth...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

This would have been a day to mark on your calendar! When you see the salvation of God, for all people!

I feel as if Luke is practically shouting at us to look for and remember the encounter of the glory of God in Jesus!

Did any of you ever have friends, “Jesus freak” friends, who asked you about the day and time you were “saved”? I did. And as a quiet young Roman Catholic I was always confused, because I didn’t have a momentous flash of insight, or a sudden breakthrough, or a life altering vision.

They did. They would talk with joy of the day and hour they let Jesus into their heart!

I had no experience like that.

I had a different experience and I didn’t know how to explain it at first...

I experienced the love of God through the love of family and faith community...as they filled in the valleys of my darkness, or as they laid low the mountains of my fears, as they smoothed out the rough places of my angers and insecurities, and made my life straighter, and brighter, with their love and patience and laughter.

I did see salvation, I saw healing though I hardly realized what I was looking at: the actions of gentle and generous adults; priests and nuns, lay people, Christians, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists...friends of our family, people in my world, all of whom modeled living compassionate and dedicated lives, easing the burdens of others, healing their broken places, bringing joy into their lives.

My parents, Jewish and Muslim anthropology colleagues, the Buddhist roshi who spent time at our house, Br. David Steindl-Rast, monk and mystic who watched us seven Lang kids grow up on his frequent visits...Fr. Earl Rohleder whom I met when I was four years old and who officiated at my wedding 23 years later. I called him up and said, “So...I’m in love with this priest, and we want to get married, and we know it will get us into a heap of trouble, but yeah...and would you do our wedding mass, even though it will get you into a heap of trouble?” And Fr. Earl said, “yes”.

And so, I did not have a single powerful moment...but a lifetime of them.

My “high point” memories dot my life. I remember many, many moments with deep gratitude.

Looking back, I can see how important they were to forming me, and introducing me to Jesus, to God, to the Holy Spirit.

I’m not at all sure I recognized their powerful shaping of me til later. Often, much later!

But I can see that now. Often separated by years and years of not seeing. Little glimpses of light and life, and God’s patient love.

For some of us, this is our way into the good news of God’s salvation coming into the world, into our world. Through the stories of our lives.

Scholars ask certain kinds of questions:

- Is Luke saying that John began his preaching and teaching on repentance during Tiberius’ reign or the two years of his co-reign with Augustus?

- Did John and Jesus come onto the stage of life in Israel during the high priesthood of Annas, or his son in law Caiaphas, who was high priest after him?

I ask myself different kinds of questions:

- Was it during that one magical afternoon as a little girl, when I was swinging, giddy with happiness, and fell in love with God then? I still remember that day.
- Or was it in the snow, one dusky Winter evening as a cranky, moody teen, when I lost all sense of separateness and loneliness and felt utterly encompassed, in communion and love with everything? Did I fall in love with God that night?

The list goes on and on...

I urge you, as you live your life, to *look at your life*. Take stock of every gift given, great and small. Look hard, and perhaps even some of the stories of darkness and bitterness now have the power of meaning? Perhaps the powerful moment of shaping you is as clear as the moment it happened, and you can recall date and time!

Perhaps you are a bit more like me...lots of memories, some clear, some less so...

These are precious God-given gifts, do not take them for granted.

Do not forget them.

Treasure them, polish them with loving care so they shine in your memory...clear and bright.

Tell the stories of your moments.

Tell the stories that save you, heal you, bring you closer to the love of God in Jesus.

May they be as clear as the memory of the day you went home again, or the day you got married, or the day you fell in love, or the day you found out you were going to be a parent. A day of beauty and power you will never forget!

Tell those stories so they can be your Gospel, your "good news": your story that, somehow God's healing, saving love came to you; you learned of your "salvation" through story after story.

And that gospel of saving love is for "all flesh", as the prophet Isaiah promises, for all people, for all the world.

It's not even just about your story; it's everybody's stories that count!

So, go ahead and tell your stories, and listen to their stories, and be glad for hearing the good news of God in every time and place, every calendar, every heart.

Alleluia!