

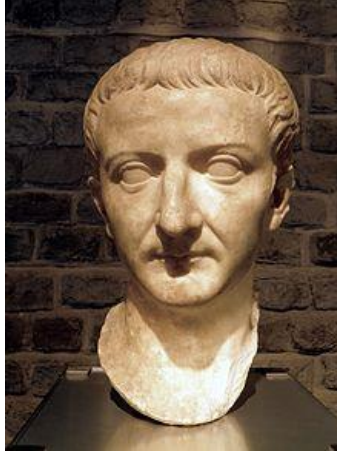
## Repent! John the Baptist

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## Luke 1:68-79



Our Gospel reading opens with a list of names, mostly obscure and hard to pronounce. We also know about these names outside of the Bible through ancient historians and archaeology. What Luke is trying to do is to place this story in history. We have a system where we give a number for every year (2015). That wasn't really used until the 9th century AD. Before that historians would often say the year of an important ruler. Luke says this part of his story takes place in the fifteenth year of Emperor Tiberius. We know Tiberius was officially in power from 14 to 37AD.



We know Pontius Pilate was a governor of Judea from 26-36 AD.



Archaeologists have found his name engraved in the city of Caesarea on a plaque stating that Pontius Pilate built a pagan temple to the honour of Tiberius.



Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee from 4BC to 39AD. He was the son of Herod the Great. Another son of Herod the Great was Philip who ruled northeast of the Sea of Galilee.

And Lysanias ruled an area just northwest of Damascus. Caiaphas succeeded as High Priest of the Jerusalem Temple in 18AD after his Father-in-law, Annas, was deposed by the Romans, but he still had substantial influence on his son-in-law. Archeologists actually think they found Caiaphas' ossuary in 1990.



So what all this means is we can place the ministry of John the Baptist sometime around 26 to 28 AD, by our way of measuring time.

It would be a bit like saying, “in the 63rd year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth the second, and the first year of the leadership of Justin Trudeau as Prime Minister of Canada.” In the ancient world this is how historians would indicate time.

I know these names and dates don't mean a lot to us, but Luke wants us to know that the story he is telling has a place in history, with real people and real places. We do this every week when we say the creed. We mention the name “Pontius Pilate”. Why do we mention that name? He was a pagan. The ancient historian Josephus described him as ruthless and greedy. So this ruthless, greedy, pagan, and relatively obscure Roman governor who was responsible for having Jesus crucified is mentioned in the middle of the holy liturgy. Doesn't that seem strange? I think it would be incredibly strange to Pontius Pilate that Christians all over the world in numerous languages for nearly two thousand years have been mentioning his name as they worship. We do that because we believe that Jesus was a part of human history, with real people in real places. That wasn't the case with many ancient religions.

But, none of those rulers mentioned ultimately matter in terms of what God was about to do. To Luke they give us a time in history. But, they aren't the ones the Word of God comes to. At this point it had been 400 years since they heard God's word from a prophet and now Luke tells us “the Word of God came to John”. The silence has been broken.

John is speaking God's word in the wilderness. It is a place of testing and purifying, which is exactly what John is about. Many years before, after the Hebrews were rescued from slavery in Egypt they spent 40 years in the wilderness. It was a time of testing and purification. Then they entered the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan River. It was to that same river that John called the people. He called them to come back to the Jordan River and reenter the Promised Land. They had failed as God's people and John was calling them back to the Jordan River to cleanse themselves of their sin and prepare for what God was about to do. John called the people to repentance.

We tend to think of repentance in a very negative way. When we hear the word "repentance" our modern minds think of bad self-esteem or medieval monks whipping themselves, but that wasn't necessarily what was in the minds of the crowd who heard John. Repentance means to change your mind or change your heart. It is a change of direction. If you are walking into the street and a bus is about to hit you and someone yells at you and you step back onto the curb, you have made an act of repentance. It is about turning away from something bad. ... But, repentance can also be positive. Maybe you have been in the mall and you have suddenly smelled popcorn and if you're hungry you will change your direction towards the popcorn- that too is repentance. Repentance is turning away from what is bad, but it is also turning towards what is good.

The turning towards is more important. You can't live a holy life by just turning away from bad continuously. That is a bit like going to the airport and asking to "not go to Vancouver". Well there are all kinds of places you can go and still not go to Vancouver. It is important to have a direction and a goal. Or, perhaps think of it this way. You won't have a garden by just pulling weeds all the time. All you will have is dirt. You have to plant flowers and nurture them. Yes, we want to repent and turn away from the bad, but more importantly we want to turn towards what is good.

And God doesn't want us to repent to ruin our fun. We can sometimes think sin would be a whole lot of fun if God didn't have such a thing about it.[1] No, God wants us to repent for our own good. When we turn towards God we are turning towards the source of all beauty, joy, and truth. When we turn away from God we are turning away from the source of all beauty, joy, and truth. That path eventually leads to ugliness, sorrow, and deception. When we turn towards God, we align with the very purpose we were created, which is to love God and enjoy Him forever.

The more clearly we see God for who God actually is, the more we will feel the desire to adjust our lives accordingly. Once in a while I meet people who are looking for a god who "matches them". It's like they are shopping for a pair of pants. They keep looking for a god that fits them. But, that is a consumerist fantasy. If the God we are seeking is the true God we will always be called to transformation because we will always be adjusting our lives to His tremendous truth, beauty, and joy. Our repentance is insufficient if we just want to "not be bad". We need a repentance towards the beauty of God and the goodness and joy he is calling us into.

So one way we often go wrong about repentance is that we think of it in such a negative way. Another way we go wrong is that we tend to think that it is a one-time thing. As

Christians, we live lives of repentance. Which is really just another way of saying we live a life of learning. We are continuously seeking to know more of God and to have our lives adjusted according to his beauty and holiness. ... But, it is also true that God is continuously on the move. God is on the move in our lives calling us to work on certain friendships, to reach out to those in need in particular ways, and to deal with issues and hurt in our past, among other things. Our God is on a mission and that means He is on the move, and that means we will have to continuously have to adjust our course to follow Him. This means we are going to be living a life of continuous turning, or repentance, if we are going to try to be a part of what he is doing in the world and in our lives.

John was out in the wilderness calling the people to repent. God was about to do something new. That is what John was announcing. John wanted them to turn and face God so they were ready. He was “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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’”. Imagine traveling from Calgary to Edmonton when the settlers were arriving in Alberta. Compare that to now on Highway 2, where bridges cross over the valleys and creeks, and the road cuts through the hills, and we drive on paved roads rather than dirt cart trails. If you are expecting an important visitor you want to make it easy to get to you. That is what repentance does. It makes it easy for God to get through to us because we are making ourselves ready for Him.

Advent is a time when we remember that God came to us as a little child, but it is also a time to remember that He is coming again. Advent is a time to remind ourselves to repent and make ourselves ready to meet God. It is a time to remind ourselves to live in continuous openness to God as we look for him to lead us into greater and greater joy, beauty, and truth.

Dallas Willard