

Journey of Christmas Week 2: Journey of Humility - Luke 1:67-80 **David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (December 20, 2020)**

Good morning Pathway! How are you doing today? Only a few more days to Christmas! There's a lot of excitement at our house and we're been enjoying having a fire in our fireplace a few times this week, roasting some marsh-mellows. We're thinking through what Christmas traditions we can do as a family to make this season meaningful and fun as a family.

As we move into the week of Christmas, is there anything special you appreciate more this year? How has your experience of 2020 changed your perception of Christmas? One of the perennial challenges during the advent season is to reorient our perspective from the busyness and commercialism that suffocates and overwhelms this season, and put our focus back on why Jesus came to earth, and the mission he has left us with. When all we have of Christmas is the decorations, the shopping, and the holiday movies, there is something empty in that, something else that we desire. If you're watching this and you're new to faith, or new to Christianity, we're going on a journey this month of how Christmas came to be and what it continues to mean today.

Our focus for this month is on the metaphor of travel, the journey that Christmas takes us on. We're looking at two of the people who made a way for Jesus to come to earth, beginning with Mary last week. BG shared about Mary's journey from fear to wonder, from wonder to trust, and then from trust to surrender. Today I'm looking at another person who prepared the way for Jesus, John the Baptist. Like Jesus, John's life and ministry was first announced by an angel before his birth. Please turn with me to Luke chapter 1, and I'm going to read the last part of the chapter beginning at verse 67.

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David

⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

⁷¹ salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—

⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

John was given a **special role**, even before he was born. He was set apart before God. I wonder what it would have been like to grow up knowing in such specific detail what your life was meant to be about. So many of us have to put in significant effort to figure out our interests, our strengths, and the right career choice. It must have been nice to know what he was meant to do.

But I also wonder if it became limiting at times, if he felt constrained by such a specific role. I wonder if he imagined an alternative future, if he were to rebel against the mission given to him before he was even born, and go to make his own way in the world. I don't know how he processed his calling, and we know almost nothing about his early life, but what we do is that he was faithful to it. We're told he lived in the wilderness until his public ministry began.

Jesus came at the right time, and there were certain steps that needed to take place before his ministry started. John played a huge role in setting the stage, and laying the groundwork for Jesus's ministry to take off. Let's walk through a few of the major points in his father Zachariah's prophecy.

Zachariah is praising God for coming to His people and saving them. God hadn't forgotten about the prophecies and promises that were first made thousands and years ago, but was now finally bringing them to reality. God was now rescuing them from their enemies. Zachariah is placing the role of John within the larger story of Israel, recognizing that John is not acting in isolation but is instead continuing the work that the other prophets and heroes of faith have been doing for centuries.

In addition to the continuity with the history of Israel, there is also aspects of discontinuity, of something that has not been seen before. This is different, unprecedented as we like to say these days. In verse 76, Zachariah moves to more specifics about the role that John would grow up to have. Here are some of them:

**And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,**

John's role was that of preparation. He was setting the stage, getting things ready, and preparing people's hearts for the ministry of Jesus. He was an opening act, not the top billing artist on the poster.

**⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,**

Salvation does require understanding. We need to know what we are saved from, and who we are saved by. The Greek concept of God was of an unchanging spirit, removed from human experience, with no emotion. The Hebrew concept of God leaned toward a judge who enforced the rules of the law. Both of these pictures are inaccurate, so John needed to bring the picture of a God who loved his people and was coming to save them from their sins through repentance and baptism.

He focused his message on the reality of people's sin and their urgent need for repentance and life change. If you don't see that you have a problem, that you aren't very likely to look for a solution. John focused his energy on telling people about the problem they had, that they needed to admit this problem, and that God could cleanse them. His ministry wasn't Christian baptism as we know it now, but was using water to represent God's cleansing power in people and their potential to be made new.

**78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven**

The reason for our salvation is God's mercy, his undeserved favor toward us. We don't deserve salvation on our own. It is a free gift of God offered to us, regardless of our status, and our situation. Jesus's coming is due to the tender mercy of God, His care and concern for us, and His desire to give us new life.

**79 to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."**

Darkness is a regular image for those living without God. Without God, we are in the shadow of death, living in the uncertainty of what death will bring for us. But God offers us a way out, to guide us into the path of peace. Peace is what will mark our journey and our existence. I'll return to this topic of peace next week when I look at the message that the angel brought to the shepherds.

As we consider the example of John and how we can learn from him, there's one attribute that really jumps out. My summary for us today is this:

❖ Leading people to Jesus requires humility.

In a "Peanuts" cartoon, Linus tells Charlie Brown, "When I get big, I'm going to be a humble little country doctor. I'll live in the city, see, and every morning I'll get up, climb into my sports car, and zoom into the country! Then I'll start healing people... I'll heal people for miles around!" In the last frame, he exclaims, "I'll be a world famous humble little country doctor!"

It is hard to be humble, isn't it? As soon as you start feeling like you've got it, and you start feeling proud of yourself for being humble, you have to evaluate again and fight again against pride taking root in your life. That's been a regular process for me.

You might be wondering what humility is exactly. We use the word, but perhaps don't always know what it means. The first definition I found online from the Oxford dictionary is this: "a modest or low view of one's own importance; humbleness." Ok, that sounds fine, but not great. Merriam Webster says this: "freedom from pride or arrogance." That sounds better. Another definition says that "in a religious context humility can mean a recognition of self in relation to a deity (i.e. God) or deities, and subsequent submission to said deity." All of these are part of what humility means.

As John's ministry took off, he had a lot of reasons to be confident in himself, and proud of what he had done. He had a huge following, and was shaping the public discussion across the whole country. He was famous, and had remained faithful to his calling and mission given to his father. In John chapter 3, the ministry of Jesus was just starting out. Some of John's disciples come to complain, and this is what

they said, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”

Everyone is going to him. You are losing your influence, your fame, and your value. They recognized that John himself had testified about him, so they understood on some level that John had intended to lead to the ministry of Jesus. But as soon as Jesus’s ministry started to have an impact, they were all up in arms, defending their position, their role, and their status quo. This can be a great challenge in discipleship and leadership development: we might be happy to help someone grow in their faith or their leadership until it begins to look as though they’re doing better than us. It can sting to hear, look, their department has grown bigger, or look, they’re becoming a better preacher.

When I handed over the church I was leading in Kenya, it is easy to have those mixed emotions – you do want them to do well, but if everything just takes off and the people and the finances just explode as soon as you step away, it can be challenging to celebrate that. I have to remind myself, it is not about me, it about God and God’s mission, and setting up others to success, whether or not I get the credit, or the glory, or the recognition.

John’s perspective, however, is different. This is how he responds:

27 To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. 28 You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ 29 The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. 30 He must become greater; I must become less.

Ultimately, humility stems from understanding who God is and who we are. Once we understand that, so much of our life falls into place. But when we don’t recognize that, we are setting ourselves up for frustration and failure. John was content for Jesus to become great, and for his ministry to become less.

But it is also true that even after this conversation, John continued preaching and baptizing even as he saw his influence waning in comparison with Jesus’ ministry. The point is that humility does not mean that we slack off, stop doing anything, and then blame God for our lack of results. We should seek to use to the fullest what God has entrusted to us to the best of our ability, giving all glory for any results to Him.

Humility recognizes that my role in God’s program is temporary. I am valuable, all of us are, but my mission, my work, my influence is not permanent. My work is that of a sign pointing to something else, something up, and something far greater than myself. That is our work and our role as followers of Jesus Christ. And to do that effectively, we must have humility. Saint Augustine said that the three precepts of Christianity are humility, humility and humility.

Andrew Murray, the South African theologian and pastor, wrote a whole book on Humility in which he said, “Humility, the place of entire dependence on God, is, from the very nature of things, the first duty and the highest virtue of the creature, and the root of every virtue. And so pride, or the loss of this

humility, is the root of every sin and evil.” (Humility: The Beauty of Holiness [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 12)

This year has been a lesson in humility. There’s a part of me that wants things to be big, to be great, to be grand, because that’s what success is supposed to look like. I’ve had to keep reminding myself that God does not use the criteria that we do. God measures our success not by how big our church or our ministries are but by how well we are doing in pointing people to Christ.

A story is told about Leonard Bernstein, the celebrated conductor of the NY Philharmonic. A report asked him the most difficult instrument to play, and the maestro said: “Second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who plays second violin with enthusiasm is difficult. Yet, if no one plays second fiddle, we have no harmony.”

Are you willing to play the second fiddle, to allow God to take the glory? Are you willing to have the humility to point people to Jesus, recognizing that isn’t about your status or influence but about glorifying God? John illustrated humility, and showed us how to point to Jesus without getting in the way.

We don’t have the exact role that John did of preparing the way for Jesus’s birth. That’s already been done. But all of us do have the role of leading people to Jesus. Sometimes that means leading someone in the final step of giving their life to become a Christ follower. Sometimes it means walking with someone as they grow in their faith. And other times it means laying the groundwork, making the introduction.

I’d like to close with inviting us to give. I believe that giving is an expression of humility, of recognizing that even though I could keep all that I have, I’m giving it back to bless others and to contribute to God’s mission. There should be a link on your screen to where you can give online, or get our address to give by mail.

In addition to our regular giving, I’m also inviting us to give a special end of year offering toward Nairobi Chapel. We’ve been partnering with them for ministry, and even though we haven’t been able to do any travel or bring anyone over from Kenya this year, we are still standing with them and supporting their outreach efforts and the food bank they are running in Nairobi. Many people in Nairobi are facing tremendous economic pressure and are in great need of help. We are continuing to support local ministries and covid-19 relief here, but I believe it is important to keep a global perspective as well and be able to support people in need all over the world, and not just here in California. Let’s put together a special contribution that be a great blessing to them that we can send over.

Reflection Questions

In what areas of your life or service do you struggle with pride?

What can you do this Christmas season to point someone around you to Christ?