

Malachi 3:1-4  
Luke 3:1-6  
Text: Luke 3:3-4

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## GETTING READY

When Luke tells his story of the birth of Jesus in chapter two, he opens by telling us two names that epitomize massive power. The first is Caesar Augustus, the first of the Caesars, the undisputed head of the Roman Empire and arguably the most powerful man who had ever lived. Augustus was known by the titles: “Son of God” and even “God.” The second name is Quirinius, Governor of the Roman province of Syria in whose territory Judea, and therefore Bethlehem, lay. Thirty years later, and immediately following the birth story in the gospel account, Luke opens chapter three with a longer list of immensely powerful, fearful, and vindictive people. The Caesar by this time is Augustus’ successor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate is named Roman governor of Judea, King Herod is the vassal king of the territory under Roman rule, and there are a fistful of lesser governors and high priests. Between these two lists of immensely powerful people lies the story of the birth of an infant to two peasant people with no social credentials, except in what was then the miniscule hamlet of Nazareth, barely a crossroads in the first century. A newborn seemingly as helpless and fragile, by comparison, as a paramecium in a vat of acid.

Here, then, is an extraordinary study in silent contrasts. In narrating Jesus’ birth, Luke tells of an event so discreet, so obscure amid the backwaters of the poor of the earth, that neither the Romans—perhaps the most methodical administrators and record keepers in history—nor General Flavius Josephus, the eminent Jewish historian and a contemporary of the apostles, make any mention of it. No one does, outside of just two gospels, Matthew and Luke. Luke’s account is a stroke of narrative genius, nestled between two paragons of power is this birth of an infant to an obscure peasant girl, still in her teens. Yet Jesus was destined to outshine the imperial powers of earth the way sunlight overwhelms darkness.

Enter John the Baptist. For centuries, tradition held that before the Messiah came he would be preceded by a figure like one of the great prophets of old, one who would announce and get ready for the coming of

the Christ, the Messiah (the words Christ and Messiah, the first Greek, the second Hebrew, both mean “anointed one”). John’s trek into the desert, calling the people to come and hear him, recalls the way Israel began her existence in the wilderness with Moses. Luke is telling us that a new community of God is about to be inaugurated. John’s preaching brings the people to a new level of reflection and commitment, the embrace of a true sovereign, not the leader of imperial Rome but the God who gives life and power even to emperors. John is to bring the people to a sense of reflection, honor, and embrace of their true sovereign. That means overcoming some huge obstacles, reconfiguring the peoples habits, getting them to stand still and reflect upon what it means to stand in the presence of their sovereign, the Messiah of God.

Get yourselves ready, says John, for the King will soon be among you.

In 1955, a couple of years after Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation, our normally placid household at 1 Cromwell Road, in the village of Penwortham, England, was all abuzz with the news that on the Tuesday after Easter, Her Royal Highness was to visit our area. As a spectacular bonus, my dear mum was to meet the Queen briefly in a line of selected employees from the Lancashire County Police Headquarters where she was a clerk. An ardent royalist with a lifelong love of and admiration for the royal family, my mother looked forward to the event with a heady sense of pride and expectation, the sort of anticipation one reserves for rare moments in life. And we were excited with her. That same night my parents would travel to Blackpool, about twenty five miles away, where they had splendid seats for one of the premiere variety shows of the year, called the Royal Command Performance, at which Queen Elizabeth would also be present.

As my dad was a policeman, we had two family members with inside knowledge of the massive extent of preparations involved in a royal visit. I remember sitting at the supper table, my untouched food steadily decomposing on my plate as I listened in awe to how policemen would be stationed on every bridge as the Royal Train sped underneath with split second timing, halting the traffic above until the train screamed by; how every railroad embankment, crossing and switch point would be inspected and guarded for hundreds of miles; how traffic lights would be hand monitored to accommodate the royal motorcade; how vigilant plain-clothes police would mingle with the crowd; how the people likely to have contact with the royals would be questioned and meticulously selected; even some walls and doors might be relocated to accommodate the movement of the royal entourage in the buildings they passed through. Other doors are often locked to prevent one of the “Royals” straying from the appointed path, as

Prince Philip notoriously does. It was a massive operation, and I was in awe.

Preparation, preparation, preparation. This was, after all, the visitation of a “royal.” To a child of ten she was like a supernatural entity—a “god,” no less!

When John the Baptist talks about preparing the ground for the coming Messiah, the king of kings, it sounds like he’s calling people to bulldoze mountains into plains: “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked shall be made straight, the rough places made smooth.” He’s not talking about bulldozing the land (although it was not unheard of for the Romans to reconfigure the landscape and deforest a valley for a Caesar’s visit, to afford a better view). These are metaphors of the self, of the obstacles and hindrances that impede our view of God.

Preparing for God’s royal visit (Christmas) means getting our personal house in order, cleaning our spiritual habitation, the part of us that orders our day, sets our priorities, the people we go to for advice and counsel. Luke puts it this way, saying that John went about the whole region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The emphasis is on forgiveness. In other words, the first priority was to come clean before God. Wouldn’t it be odd to leave spilled cat litter and dirty laundry in the middle of the living room floor, with a hasty note taped to the front door that says, “Come on in your Highness, sorry to miss you, had to run to the mall.”

To hear John the Baptist, you had to put yourself within earshot. There was a journey to be made to the place of new beginnings where he preached, to the wilderness free from distractions beside the river where they might be washed clean. The call was into the wilderness because that’s the place of refuge from the world, the one place free from material distractions. It was where Israel, centuries before, began their spiritual formation.

Finally, you have to turn up at the right parade in order to see the King when he passes by. There are, of course, many parades to choose from, especially this time of year. But you can’t just drop into a vacant lounge chair by the roadside. That’s where the waiting, diligence, and expectation come in, and the hard choices.

If you were to view a picture of the Queen’s official coat of arms, you would see at the center a shield, symbol of the defense of the realm, surmounted by a crown, a symbol of royal authority. Embedded in the crown are a series of three crosses, with a fourth above on the rim of the crown. Above these stands a heraldic lion, protector of the monarch’s crown, and on its head another crown. And at the very top of that crown is a final cross, the symbol of Christ and the sign that everything beneath that cross lies

voluntarily under the Lordship of Christ, the King of kings. Its presence and placement declare that Christ is the ultimate authority, the first allegiance of both monarch and subject.

The story of my mother and the Queen ended with a double sadness, yet a special dignity. On Good Friday, just four days before the royal visit, my mother received a telegram to say that her beloved and favorite brother, Alfred (she was one of six children) had died after a long bout with cancer. What was especially tragic was that he had served in the British Army for five years, almost the duration of the war. Early on he had volunteered to stay with the last party on the beach during the miraculous evacuation of British and French troops at Dunkirk. They were to detonate the last of the munitions so they didn't fall into the hands of the enemy. He had also been with Montgomery at El Alamein, then all through Sicily and Italy, and into the body of Europe. So, eventually, he came home again, only to be stricken with cancer within a very few years. He was still in his forties. The funeral was to be held about forty miles away in Manchester on the day of the Queen's visit. She went, of course, to the funeral, and never did meet the Queen or attend the gala performance that night. But she did the right thing, honoring the life of her brother in the presence of the giver of life—the King of kings. Some things are just too important.

Amen.