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## What Happened To Baby Jesus?

Texts: **Malachi 3: 1-4** **Luke 3: 1-6**; “I like you”, Fred Rogers

Hey, it's almost Christmas! It's the second Sunday of Advent! And we are hearing a lesson about the grown-up John the Baptist! Wait, what? Whatever happened to baby Jesus? I mean, we came to church this morning, all ready for the Christmas story! We thought we were going to be with mother and child in a stable somewhere, or at least worshipping at a manger out back of a “No Vacancy Motel Six” in the little town of Bethlehem. But instead, here we are out in the desert, listening to some guy shouting “Prepare the Way of the Lord!” and wanting to give us all a bath in a river. And it's thirty years after Jesus' birth!

What's going on here? Have our lectionary authors gone completely insane? Have they joined the War on Christmas? Has Luke? What gives?

What gives is we might be ready for a baby at Christmas, but we're not ready for the grown-up Jesus. A baby, yes, but not for Jesus. Jesus is the coming of the kingdom of God, and that means a total rethink about life. We're not ready for that yet. So first we get John. In the desert wilderness. By a river.

The juxtaposition shouldn't be lost on us. The wilderness is a bunch of scrub brush, barely alive. The river is water and water means life, life flowing through a land of almost death. The whole geography says *this is where life is found in the midst of death*. This place, right here, this is where you have to come if you want to live: “Come and find life, you people who are almost dead; look where you are and come over here instead.”

So that's the place, that's where we are. Luke wants us to consider the place. And he wants us to think of the time, too: it's the time of Tiberius Caesar, a time of peace, but a Roman peace, peace at the end of a sword, the kind of peace kept in place by a good crucifixion every now and then. Not much of a peace, not the best, but maybe not the worst either.

It's the time, says Luke, of Pontius Pilate – hey, wait a minute, he comes in at the end of the story, doesn't he? What's he doing here in chapter 3? Like a kid in a Christmas play coming on stage early, here's Pontius Pilate wandering into Luke's story far ahead of his cue. Get back to your chapter, Pilate! It's not time for you yet!

But already, you see, there's a foreboding cloud hanging here in the desert air of chapter 3, that ominous name, the obscure Roman governor of an obscure Roman province whom nobody should remember as he never amounted to anything, except that Christians have confessed Pilate's name in the Apostle's Creed for centuries: “Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried...” Pilate is the one who crucified the Savior. Pilate's shadow is going to hang over the story of Jesus, from beginning to end.

And it's the time of Herod, not the despicable despot Herod the Great, who tried to kill the baby Jesus, but his equally despicable son, the other despot Herod Antipas, married to his own niece who was once also married to Herod's brother. What a family! Yecch!

That says all we need to know about this reprobate's respect for the laws of God and man, as they used to say. His is an ominous name, too, because we know that this fool will save his pride by delivering up the platter-placed head of John the Baptist – yes, our John – to fulfill a vow to an even more foolish young girl, who might instead have had half a kingdom from her rash stepfather, on the night that she danced and he lusted.

That's the place, that's the time, the world's a mess, like it always is, and into this mess comes the word of God to John, a nobody in this world, and the word says, "The kingdom of God is coming. The Messiah is on his way. Call the people to repentance." With a message like that, what's a nobody to do?

Well, John goes out to a famous river, the River Jordan, where the tribes of Israel first passed over into the promised land, and he starts acting all crazy. Nothing attracts a crowd like a can full of crazy! John starts shouting that everyone needs to come out of the city, out of so-called civilization, and get a little wild, and get a little clean, and have a bath and change their lives. At first, people went out to see the crazy guy who was ranting in the desert. Everyone loves a good clown show. "Let's go see the cricket-eater, let's have a laugh at the honey-dripper, let's go make fun of the girded-loin guy, we can take a lunch and make a picnic of it." But then they stopped to listen to what he was saying. And they realized that this crazy guy made more sense to them than the staid and righteous people in the temple, and that his ranting brought more peace to their hearts than all the pious intonations of *those other people* in the city. That wasn't supposed to happen.

"Oh dear," they said to themselves, "oh dear, now what? A man speaking to my soul and its pain. A man who knows I have no peace, no peace in my heart, no peace with my family, no peace at work, no peace with my life. A man who knows I have no peace with my rulers, and worse yet, no peace with my God. Oh dear ... oh dear... now what?"

"Now what?" John says, "Now what? Now you have to get ready! You have to get ready for the most stupendous thing that has ever happened. You have to get ready for the event that will change everything. You have to get ready because the Lord is coming, and you *aren't* ready yet! In fact, you're totally unprepared for his coming! Get ready, and then you'll have peace!"

And then they said, "No, we're ready. We've been waiting a long time, and we know the Lord and we'll recognize him when he comes." Now at this point, Jesus has been alive for thirty years, and John knows that because he is Jesus' cousin. For thirty years the Lord has already been in the world, and no one has recognized him. No one has had eyes to see or ears to hear. They aren't ready *at all*. So John says, "You're fooling yourselves! You're not ready!!! Not at all. Come down into this water and rethink your life, and then you'll be ready. It's pretty cold and it's going to help!"

There's nothing, you see, like a good dunking in cold water to open your eyes and wake you up in the morning. There's nothing like a good dunking to get your brain going and jolt it into wakefulness, so that your eyes are ready to see and your ears are ready to hear. That's what John was telling them, those people almost two thousand years ago. That's what they needed to hear to get ready for the coming of Jesus.

They needed to rethink their lives, so that their hearts and minds were open to what God was going to do. They needed to rethink their lives so that they were ready to meet God when God came, so that they would see God when God was right before their eyes. That *rethinking* involved getting ready to be changed. As long as they were satisfied with themselves, they'd never find peace and they'd never find life. As long as they thought there would be peace when the rest of the world changed around them, leaving them untouched, they would never see what God was doing in the world. They had to rethink their lives so that they were ready to have God enter into their world, not just to change it, but to change them as well, because if God could change them, then God could change the world.

Now that was two thousand years ago, you might be saying, they weren't ready to meet Jesus when he came, but we've known about this for a long time. We're ready. We would never fail to notice him if he were present. We would never miss him if he were here. *Our* eyes are open and *our* hearts are ready to receive him when he comes. But are they? Because he is here right now, you know. He is right here at this table, his body and his blood, right here, right now. Did you notice him? Not the baby Jesus in the manger, but the crucified Christ, the Lord whom Pontius Pilate killed, with Herod's blessing, *crucified, dead, and buried, and ... risen*, yes, Jesus, the risen Lord, is here, right here, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

If you didn't see him, let that be a splash of cold water that wakes you up! If you didn't see him, rethink your life, get ready to be changed, and open your life to his presence.

What ever happened to the baby Jesus? He grew up into the crucified and risen Savior, and he is right here. Make your hearts ready, and come and meet him today.  
Amen