

“Setting the Stage”
Isaiah 40:1-5/Luke 3:1-6

The true story is told of a day when filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille was making one of his epic motion pictures. He had six cameras at various points to pick up the overall action and five other cameras set to film plot developments involving the major characters. The large cast had begun rehearsing the scene at 6 a.m. They went through it four times and now it was late afternoon. The sun was setting and there was just enough light to get the shot done. DeMille looked over the panorama, saw that all was right and gave the command for action.

One hundred extras charged up the hill; another hundred came storming down to engage in a mock battle. In another location, Roman centurions shouted at two hundred slaves who labored to move a huge stone monument into its final resting place. Meanwhile the principal characters acted out, in close-up, their reactions to the battle on the hill. Their words were drowned out by the noise around them, but the dialogue was to be dubbed in later.

It took fifteen minutes to complete the scene. When it was over, DeMille yelled, “Cut!” and turned to his assistant, all smiles. “That was great!” he shouted. “It was, C.B.,” the assistant yelled back. “It was fantastic. Everything went off perfectly!” DeMille turned to face the head of his camera crew to find out if all the cameras had picked up their assigned area. He waved to the supervisor who was a number of yards away. From the top of the hill, the supervisor waved back, raised his megaphone, and shouted, “Ready when you are, C.B.!” (*Bits ‘n Pieces*, circa 1993)

Fortunately, few of us have to worry about that many moving parts. We all do have times, of course, when we have to coordinate schedules to bring about a particular outcome and whether it is getting everyone’s calendar together for a surprise birthday party or assembling all of the documents required for a mortgage closing or something else entirely, it can get complicated for us, too. Yet the Biblical passages before us this day remind us that we serve one with infinitely more pieces to consider; one who weaves them together with perfect timing.

For the first two Sundays of 2018 our focus is on John the Baptist. That first century man was the one whose primary role was to prepare the way for Jesus. The two were related in some fashion with John a few months older. In ways not recorded for us John came to understand that his purpose was to set the stage for Jesus’ ministry. Our reading from Luke tells of his start.

“The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness,” Luke recalls. Other gospel writers note that John’s clothing consisted of camel’s hair with a leather belt and that he subsisted on a diet of locusts and wild honey. Luke isn’t concerned with those details, but instead wants to make sure the reader understands John was fulfilling a prophecy of old. “He went into all the region around the Jordan,” Luke goes on “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins 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.’” Next week we will focus on John’s actual words to the crowds—the most detailed account of his preaching found anywhere in the New Testament—but today we stop with Luke’s skillful work in setting the stage.

A close look reveals how thoroughly he prepares the reader. Luke opens by placing John’s ministry at a time when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod ruler of Galilee; he names two other officials as well. Luke goes on to note that John’s appearance happened when Annas and Caiaphas served as high priest; the former as the active leader of Jewish life and the latter in a more honorary role. Naming all of those men—political and religious —helps historians date John’s ministry as starting somewhere between the years of 26 and 29 A.D.

Luke goes on to replicate the Biblical pattern used for introducing a prophet to the reader; namely to tell of a divine call to a particular individual, giving their name and lineage, and specifying a location and main ruler of the day. Luke does that efficiently for after naming the various officials he says “the word of the God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” He connects John’s ministry to the Old Testament prophecy we read, citing more of it than the other gospels: “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.” Then in a slight, but key modification of the prophet’s words Luke ends “and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

In only six verses he tells us of a prophet who appears from the wilderness as Isaiah had foretold, beginning his ministry in the time of Herod; the one who will have John arrested and killed. Yet more than only setting the stage for events in the life of the Baptizer, Luke skillfully prepares us for what occurs after John’s death as in those same lines he names the officials who will reappear at the time of Jesus’ arrest and trial and crucifixion—Herod and Pontius Pilate, Annas and Caiaphas. He tells of a ministry that calls for baptism, of the need to repent of sin and of a salvation meant for all humankind. Thus, that gospel writer not only introduces us to the one who sets the stage for the Messiah, but sets the stage for events in Jesus’ ministry, too.

Such a literary effort is helpful for the reader in foreshadowing the life of John the Baptist and Jesus, but that skillful work reveals something about each of our journeys, too. Our life narratives will never be recorded in Scripture and were not anticipated by prophecies uttered six centuries ago either. Yet like John the Baptist and Jesus our lives unfold under the careful oversight of God, which means that the events of our past, the conversations and successes, the challenges and disappointments, the officials and everyday people of our journey all play a part in preparing us for moving ahead. Every interaction, every discovery, every task can set the stage. To be sure most of those moments are of such a routine nature we don’t give them a thought, but there are times they have all come together in an amazing way.

Take the example of Dale Sanders. Last fall I read about him in an article written by a reporter for *The Washington Post* named Tara Bahrapour. Here’s the story. “There was a moment in August when Dale ‘Grey Beard’ Sanders considered giving up,” she writes. “In the middle of the 100-Mile Wilderness in Maine, far from help, he was bleeding internally and having heart palpitations—not surprising considering that he was 50 or 60 years older than most of the people he had met on the Appalachian Trail. Sanders called his wife in Bartlett, Tenn., and she urged him to keep going. With a go-ahead from his doctors, he did, and on Thursday, Sanders, 82, officially became the oldest person to hike the entire 2,190-mile trail in a year.

“I feel euphoric!” he said, as he broke the record previously set by 81-year-old Lee Barry in 2004. “I keep thinking, is someone going to come out of the woodwork and say, ‘Uh-uh, I hiked it last year...and I was 83’-but no one has stepped up and said that...Someone said to me, ‘You can’t do it, the only way an old person’s going to be able to hike the Appalachian Trail is if they’ve hiked before.’ That challenged me.”

“Sander had completed other impressive feats,” the journalist went on. “A couple of years ago, he paddled the length of the Mississippi River. He broke the record for underwater-breath-holding in 1959 and was IUSA spearfishing athlete of the year in 1965. But he had never done a hike lasting more than two weeks. For this one, which he started in Georgia in January, he was on the trail for a total of seven months...Sanders hiked it in a ‘flip-flop’ sequence, meaning he did a Georgia-to-Harpers Ferry leg, followed by a Maine-to-Harpers Ferry leg.

“A naturally gregarious person, Sanders had periods of depression while alone on the trail. He was helped by what he calls ‘trail angels,’ people who recognized him from seeing him on the Internet, who called out his trail name...and hiked alongside him for a stretch...The majority of his fellow hikers were in their 20s. They didn’t have to keep track of blood pressure medication or the two different kinds of eye drops that Sanders needs for glaucoma.”

Given that he had never attempted such a feat before, we might well wonder what set the stage for that kind of journey and the journalist shares an unexpected resume. “Sanders personal story included as 50-year career as a parks and recreation program administrator. He spent his boyhood on a Kentucky tobacco farm, worked as a lifeguard and was a circus acrobat and cotton-candy seller....Sanders takes 30-inch steps, so he figures he took 4,625,256 steps for the hike. Along the way, he passed tens of thousands of white blazes that mark the trail. When he passed the last one on Thursday, he stopped, took off his cap, and kissed it. A few yards later, at the conservancy headquarters, he hugged his wife and accepted a glass of sparkling cider. And with all the honesty that 82 years affords a man, he announced his next move. ‘I’m done and I’m tired,’ he said. ‘And I can go home.’” (Bahrampour, Tara. “An 82-year-old man hiked the entire Appalachian Trail. Then he danced a jig.” *The Washington Post*, October 26, 2017)

Raising tobacco or selling cotton-candy doesn’t seem to be the typical background for hiking 2200 miles any more than eating locusts or preaching in a wilderness would seem the expected preparation for introducing the Savior. Which suggests you and I don’t need to count on extraordinary events or conversations, exceptionally insightful or brave moments to prepare us for what comes next either.

And instead, on this first Sunday of a new year, we simply take our place in the drama written by God that continues to unfold before us. That just as was true of a prophet named John we rely upon the fact that all that has occurred in our life prior to this day can be used by our Maker for what is ahead. Thus we can resolve in the months ahead to follow with new fervor the one to whom the Baptizer pointed. The stage has been set. It’s time for us to get moving, too.