

“The Hinge Of History”

Throughout history, as we all know, there have been many events that have marked times of significant change (in our world), many people who have helped to bring one age (of history) to a close and usher in something new. Depending upon the change brought about, those events (and/or people) have been remembered and recorded in differing ways.

A few years back, Time magazine identified the age of the Renaissance, the Pax Romana (in the first century), the invention of the Printing Press, the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, and the two World Wars as some of the most significant events in our world's history.

In our own American history, events like the Civil War or the breaking away of the colonies might well be remembered among the ones most important. More recently, and on a more global scale, the end to apartheid in South Africa, the fall of the Berlin Wall (in Germany), and the beginnings of the communication age would certainly be among the most notable worldwide. Many events in our world's history and many people as well, will long be remembered for the change they've brought about.

Now, I've never been much of a history buff, (I'll admit it), but I've long valued its significance. And I have to believe the same is true for most people. When the driver (of the bus) slows down and tells his group of tourists that what they're seeing outside is something of historical importance, hardly a camera (or today, a cell phone) is left untouched. There's something about having a record (of important places and people and events) that is important to all of us.

In a similar way, (on a more personal level), I believe the same is true in each of our individual lives. We all want to feel as if our time on this earth has made a difference. We all want to leave an historical record of something we've done.

I remember our kids, when they were young, etching their initials in the concrete we had just poured. I'll bet some of your kids (maybe even you) did the same thing. There's something about history that has a universal attraction. There's something about leaving one's mark (in life) that's important to nearly everyone who has ever lived.

All of that to say, that as Christians, you and I are part of a tradition that takes very seriously our historical heritage. The foundation of our faith is built upon actual historical events. And today's story, (the one we just read), is written by a man who understood how important that was.

I don't know how much you remember about the gospel-writer Luke. Luke was not of the original twelve disciples, even though he later on became a faithful follower. From what we know, he was not even a Jew, but a Gentile; a well-educated man, a physician by profession, and a companion with the apostle Paul during much of his missionary travels. Luke is also the one who wrote the book of Acts, the story of the beginning of the Christian Church.

Along with all of that, Luke was also an historian, one who went out of his way to set the story of Jesus in its actual time and place and setting. The passage we read today is as clear an example (of that) as you'll find.

Remember how it begins? Luke says, “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitus, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the desert.”

Now, maybe that seems like a bit of overkill, even for one who cared deeply about historical events. Nine different people named, five different countries (or regions) listed, in just three verses. You might think, a bit over the top...but not for Luke, and not in (setting the stage) for this Jewish prophet by the name of John.

John the Baptist was a unique character. No doubt about it. (We read some of his story today.) From the clothes he wore, to the food he ate, to the place in which his message was proclaimed. Even in relation to some of the other prophets (looking back), the number of words we have from John hardly compare. And yet, so significant is his role that Luke, the gospel-writer, the physician, the missionary companion, the historian lists

(seven historical figures), apart from John and his father, Zechariah, to mark the time and place in which John's ministry began.

Just think for a moment about what's happened (in history), over the past 2000 years, to those seven figures who helped set John's ministry in its historical place? At the time it began, back in that first century, all seven (of those people) played an important part. Their lives seemed (to many) to be the ones most significant.

But what's happened to them (and to their names) since the time they actually lived? As history has recorded their lives (perhaps with the one exception of Caesar), and his isn't that different, all seven are remembered because of their connection with Jesus and/or with John. In fact, if their names are remembered at all today, it's because their lives touched history at the same time as John's, and because they have been recorded in the story of Jesus, by this man named Luke.

For Luke, John the Baptist (and his life) was a hinge of history. When he stood out in the wilderness and cried, "Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight paths for Him," he was closing out one era and opening another. He was calling an end to the old age and a beginning to the new. And in so doing, was preparing the way for Christ.

The Old Testament (and its close) and the New Testament and its beginning...at the time (it was happening), the world had no idea of the significance of the events taking place. (No idea!) Not even those who began following Jesus understood how significant their lives would become. But God knew (exactly) what was happening (in history), and God understood (in detail) its significance...and he used those events and the people involved (in them) to change its course.

In fact, have you ever thought about God's sense of humor when it comes to history; about how God chooses some of the most unlikely characters to do his work? God has a tremendous sense of humor when it comes to the time and the way and the people he chooses to carry out his will.

Just think about Herod, for example, and the pomp and circumstance that must followed him wherever he went. In the first century, Herod was as important a man as you would find. (He was a rock star!) He was a legend in his own time. But today, looking back, all his pomp is simply pompous, and all his circumstance only circumstantial.

Now, compare that with what happened with John the Baptist and his life. In those days, he was almost nothing. To many, he was considered (to be) somewhat of a kook. But his life (in comparison with Herod's), his life became a hinge because of his willingness to follow and to speak the Word of God.

Remember John's message? (It was nothing fancy.) It was the same sermon every time he preached. "Repent! Change your ways! Stop doing what you're doing and get it right! (Same sermon, every time he preached.) But every time he preached, people listened. And every time people listened, God worked to forgive sins and to change lives.

Go down the list of significant people in the Bible and it's the same thing. In almost every case, it's the unknowns that God chooses, and it's the less-than-knows that end up being remembered.

Abraham was from another country when he was first called. Moses was a tender of sheep, when he was chosen to be God's voice. Even David – who would have thought that such a young boy, ruddy as he was, (like David) would become such a great king? And Peter and James and John, and Mary and Martha, and Timothy and Matthew and Paul – it's the same thing. There's no lasting significance to any one of their lives, apart from the lasting significance their lives were given in Christ.

God has a tremendous sense of humor in the people he chooses. (He always has.) "The weak to shame the strong! The foolish to embarrass the wise! The less-than-likely (in the world), to become the ones (most likely) to leave their mark."

Even more humorous is the fact that it's still happening, even today. Just look around (for a moment) at the motley bunch he's chose, here in this room! (You think I'm kidding?) I'm not!

I don't know how history will remember your life, remember my life? (It doesn't matter.) Maybe some of us here today will do something that gets recorded. (Who knows?) But whatever it is, it'll pail in comparison to the life that's been lived for Jesus. Whatever is accomplished (along the way), in any one of our lives, it'll hardly be worth a note, apart from its connection with Christ.

John's life became a hinge of history when placed in the hands of God. There was something humorous about his life that made it what it was and it is today...but it happened. There was also something humble about his life that enabled it to be used as it was.

Remember the story? “A voice crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way, make straight the paths, level the high grounds,” he said, “and all mankind will see the salvation of God!”

Now, we didn’t read the entire story. Do you want to know the secret to John’s success? Do you know why John’s life was able to be used as it was? Because John understood his role. Because John recognized the part he was called to play. And he did it (with all he had) and for as long as he was called to do it.

Do you remember what he did then, after he had done what he was called to do? He got out of the way. He stepped aside. He slipped off (center stage) and pointed to the One whose drama was about to begin.

I believe it was the late Andy Warhol who said that everyone has a chance for their own “fifteen minutes of fame.” (I don’t know if that’s true or not.) If you look around at the world, it seems as though everyone’s waiting for their chance. But not John!

The greatness of John’s life was his commitment to someone and to something greater than himself. Just imagine what would have happened if John would have become carried away with his own success. (His preaching, his call for repentance, the crowds that were beginning to follow?) His life would have been a footnote at best. But he didn’t, and it wasn’t, and his life became a hinge.

Now, I don’t know what the aspirations of your life might be, what kind of mark you (hope and want) to leave when you’re gone. But if you want your life to make a difference, go down on your own (page of history) as a person whose life has mattered (beyond itself), then learn a lesson from John and let God, in his own humorous way, have his way, and do what he’s called you to do, and then get out of his way. And don’t worry about who gets the credit or the fame.

John’s life was the hinge of history. It brought the end to one historical age and ushered in a new (and it was done) with humor, with humility, and with hope. Now, if there’s anything we’ve learned from history, it’s that people cannot survive without hope. Hope is essential to our wellbeing. Without hope, there’s no reason to continue. Take away a person’s hope, and there’s nothing left for which to live.

Do you remember what happened in John’s life? John preached a message of hope. (He was good at it.) John was also one who needed hope. Do you remember John’s story, (what happened in his life), how his life’s history came to a close?

I can’t give you the exact date, but it was about three years later, in the eighteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar - when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod tetrarch of Galilee. Do you remember what happened to John, at the hands of that same Herod? John was thrown into prison because of what he preached and, eventually, he was killed.

Do you remember what happened when John was in prison? There came a time (in prison) when John was ready to give up hope. (He was ready to call it quits.) And Luke, the historian, gives us the account.

In chapter seven, Luke says that “John’s disciples told him all about the things Jesus was doing. And so John sent two of his (own disciples) to Jesus to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’” Are you the one who can give us hope, or should we hope for someone else?

Do you remember what Jesus said? (He said), “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them.”

“Go and tell John,” Jesus said, “what you have seen and heard. Go and tell John,” he told them, “what’s happening in people’s lives.”

My friends, I don’t want to make today’s lesson too simple, but 2000 years of history have come and gone since John the Baptist was alive, and yet nothing has changed in the calling we have in Jesus. The words he spoke to John are the same ones he speaks to us today.

“Go and tell your friends what you have seen and heard. Go and tell your neighbors about the difference Christ has made for you.” In this Advent season, leading up to Christmas, “Go and tell the people you know...the people you love, the people who matter to you,” if you want to make a difference, if you want to leave a mark, if you want to be used in a humorous and a humble way by the one who gives real and lasting hope.

We could go on all day, talking about the hope this world needs and about the calling you and I have been given to point people, just like John did, to the person and work of Christ. Let me close today, by simply reading a few verses that speak of the calling and the hope we have in Jesus. Listen to (these verses) as we close.

From Romans chapter 12: “Never be lacking in zeal...serve the Lord...be joyful in hope.”

From Hebrews chapter 10: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope...for he who promised is faithful.”

From Titus, chapter 2: “For the grace of God has appeared...teaching us to live...godly lives...while we wait for the blessed hope and appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

And from 2 Peter, chapter 1: “For we did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus, but we were eyewitnesses...of actual historical events.”

The Hinge of History – closing one age and ushering in the new – and all for us, (all for you), in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Amen.