

Luke 3:1-6—See God’s Salvation

“I spy with my little eye...” we like to play that game when we go on walks around town with the girls. Can you see what they see? Another game we like to play while driving down the road is looking for shapes in the clouds. Can you see the dinosaur or fluffy looking bunny? Can’t you see the ship being overtaken by dog? You might have done one of those eyes tests where you look at a bunch of dots and you are supposed to see a number or letter. “Do you see it?” If you don’t, you might have a certain color blindness. There are those optical illusion books. You look at this page in a certain way and this image is supposed to pop out. I don’t know I could never see it. Ask a friend to take off her glasses and ask, “Can you see it?” as you point out different objects to see how really bad her eyes might be. Can you see it? Sometimes. Other times it’s difficult. You might question the reality of whatever you are supposed to be seeing. But, in the end, whether you personally can see it doesn’t affect whether or not it is actually present.

Can you see it? A man lives in the wilderness of Judea. He looks like a Wildman with his camel’s hair clothes and a leather belt around his waist. Go out into that region outside of the city of Jerusalem, walk in the rolling badlands with all of its rocks and stones down this steep, winding decline to the Jordan River you would see a voice crying out in the wilderness. Who is this? Can’t you see? He’s the fulfillment of God’s promise through the prophet Isaiah. He comes to prepare God’s people for the coming of the Lord. His message: **“Make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation”** (v.4-6). Can’t you see? That’s John son of Zechariah. You might know him as John the Baptist or Baptizer because that’s what does. That’s what he preaches: a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He’s preparing the way for the Lord with a voice that cries out for a complete change. Who can endure in God’s presence? You are by nature sinful! Turn away from the empty promises of the world and lies you tell yourself. Then trust God forgives. Be baptized; it’s a washing of water where God gives you his gift: removal of sin and its stain.

Can’t you see it? It might have been hard to see God’s salvation in John’s day; look who’s in charge. The glory days of Israel had long ago passed into distant memory. The Jews are a shadow of what they used to be now under the rule of Tiberius Caesar, emperor of Rome. Corrupt politicians govern the land and even their religious leader, the high priest, is a pawn in their game. It’s hard to see the salvation of God when it’s taught by many of your religious leaders and experts teach you are saved by your family connections, your past history, and doing the

right things in the right ways. It's hard to see God's salvation when more voices are telling you that's the truth and there's one lonely voice crying out in the wilderness proclaiming there has to be a drastic change in you if you want to be saved.

It still can be difficult to see God's salvation. The names of the leaders have changed but look at who seems to be in charge. Is it men like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk and all their dollars? Is it the corrupt politicians caught in more scandals? Is it others who seem to be more intent with their careers than the people they are supposed to serve? Who really is in charge? Many have their own different opinions at who's pulling the strings.

God's salvation looks blurry as we see sin run rampant and only getting worse. A man plows his vehicle through a Christmas parade. How many reports of school shootings did we hear this last week? Another Covid variation leaves many wondering if this will ever end. It's hard to see God's salvation when the gods of this world, money, sex, success, self are in your face.

It's difficult to see God's saving hand when seemingly healthy receive the diagnosis of cancer and the sick only get worse. It's hard to see this salvation when children die in accidents. It's hard to see when bills grow larger, what's going on today, your list for tomorrow always seems to need your attention and you don't see it getting better any time in the future. One might wonder where this salvation is as church sizes grow smaller and budgets become tighter. It's hard to see God's salvation when we see broken and failed relationships, tension in marriages, children who won't listen, people we love make decisions that you were sure they should know better. Sometimes you might feel like you are the lonely voice proclaiming the truth. You might wonder how much you can do amongst all the other loud voices that say to do your own truth, what you think is best, and don't let anyone else tell you otherwise.

You see it out there; you see it in here, your own heart. A mountain of pride that wants to be fed with compliments and reassurances while being easily injured when it's not said the right way or when I want. Pride that hurt because she said that one thing and holds on to the fact that he treated me like that. I see the huge rocks of sin that I can't seem to get around while tripping over the same sins day after day. Some days it feels like you are stuck in a valley not sure how to pull yourself up. Other days you might wonder what's the point, will anyone care? It can be really hard to see God's salvation as the responsibilities pile on top of you, the never-ending expectations fly in your face, while stuck with knowing you can only do so much.

You want to do better. And then you don't. Others encourage you. It feels more like a guilt trip and you push back on them. To make it even worse, when it comes to sin, you want to do it. It's not just the fact we do bad things. This is who we are by nature. We cannot smooth out or straighten ourselves out by ourselves. See that no matter how hard we try we will not be ready and prepared on our own for Jesus' return.

So, where is the salvation of God? Just because you struggle to see does not mean that it's not there and real. Can't you see it? It's there in the manger, true God from eternity in the flesh, he is Emmanuel which means God with us. It's a still small voice of a crying baby with a virgin mother and carpenter father. It's a voice that grows up, deepens in tone, and speaks with power and authority that casts out demons and tells the lame to get up and walk. It's the voice of promise that when sins are forgiven on earth they are forgiven in heaven. Can't you see it? It's the silent voice as those who hate him hurl false accusations against him. It's the voice that goes to a hill called Calvary that speaks from a cross where Son of God and Son of Man chose to die. It's a voice that cries out, "Why have you forsaken me?" when even God himself abandons his Son because he became sin for us and suffers the punishment we deserve. It's the voice that promises, "It is finished," when his saving work is done. Can't you see it? The place where they buried him, it's empty. The Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep picks it up again. He lives, and it's the voice that promises, "Death has been swallowed up in victory! Because I live you also will live. Your life does not end in death. You will live with me." His reassuring voice gives you and leaves with you with real peace. See that because Jesus lives God is for us so it doesn't matter what variants, sicknesses, or the sinful world throws against us.

And that voice of your Savior Jesus continues to speak out today. He calls you to repent: "Change your mind. Change your mind from telling yourself more excuses and lies that you aren't that bad. Instead confess your sin and who you are: a sinner. See my blood that pours off that cross and purifies you from every sin. Change your attitude towards that person who has hurt you. See I died for them too. I sacrificed myself to take away the sins of the world; including theirs. Forgive them as I have forgiven you. Change your mind about going back to that sin again. See the baptismal font. You are not a slave to sin. You are baptized child of God and sin does not control you. God's salvation is written in Jesus' blood and sealed to you through water and Word. Change your mind that you need to make yourself worthy and right with God. See my body and blood that is in the bread and wine, touch, taste and see that the Lord is good. Go in peace. Your sins are forgiven." And when you have fallen again, it's that same voice of Jesus who assures you,

“Never will I leave you or forsake you. Nothing can separate you from my love. I forgive you.” See it and believe.

It’s that voice of Jesus spoken through his Word that calls us to change and then works this change within us. It’s that voice that prepares you for his return and all eyes will clearly see the salvation of God. Until then, we get a glimpse of it at work within you. We see the fruit Jesus produces when you resist sin and flee from the devil. To the world this fruit looks mundane as dad just is dad as he steps away from work so that he can spend time with children, as he changes the diapers, as he leads home devotion, as he comes home to be with his wife. It looks ordinary as she supports her husband, listens to his day, as she hugs her children and takes care of them when they hurt. It doesn’t look all that extraordinary as he goes to work flipping burgers, waiting tables, she puts numbers into the computer, and they call to check in on someone, she folds her hands in prayer. It doesn’t look all that special. But see it as God sees it—whatever you do for the least of these you do for me, Jesus says. See the extreme amount of work that God has done in you that he works through a voice speaking his Word to bulldoze and smooth out your heart so that his salvation is now yours. And he’s not done. He will continue to do this work of setting you apart from this sinful world, fashioning you into the image of his Son, to carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus returns. Until then, hear that voice that changes you from sin. Until that day, take God’s Word spoken into your ears to heart and live. Until then, pray **“That your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ”** (Philippians 1:9-10). Amen.