

Luke 2:46-3:6

Sermon: **John is as wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove**

2022.

written by: Danijel Dragaš



INTRODUCTION

1. Let us briefly recall what we studied in the last sermon.

Joseph and Mary had traveled with Jesus to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. Jesus was twelve years old at the time, and according to tradition, this was the age when a boy became a man, taking on personal responsibility for fulfilling religious commandments and obligations. At the end of their stay in Jerusalem, Mary—together with the other women—set out for home a day earlier than the men. Joseph later caught up with her, and somewhere along the way they both realized that Jesus was not with them. They searched for him among relatives and friends but did not find him, so they decided to return to Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Jesus had remained in the Temple, speaking with the teachers.

1.1. Luke then writes that Jesus “kept increasing in wisdom before God and men.” The key word here is *increasing*. In the previous sermon I mentioned that, for Jesus, this was deeply personal. Joseph and Mary had surely told him many times about the events surrounding his birth—the angelic announcements, prophecies, and testimonies. They told him that he was the Son of God, the promised Redeemer of his people, and the future King. Jesus had known from childhood who he was, but knowing who you are and understanding what that means are two very different things. This is why Jesus, unlike most people, had from an early age a burning desire to study the Scriptures. He wanted to know precisely what it meant to be the Son of God, what responsibility came with that title, and what his obligations before God were. That is why he stayed in the Temple with the teachers—because he was seeking the answer to this question: “*What does it mean to be who I am?*”

1.2. Modern Judaism—its mainstream—has nothing to teach Jesus, for after him it veered off course, abandoning God’s truth and promises. And even the teachers of that time had their issues: the Pharisees, whom Jesus often called hypocrites, had completely missed the heart of walking

personally with God. Yet there was one thing they had not missed—the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and King David. They knew that the Messiah was to come who would redeem Israel from its oppressors. Zechariah and Mary understood this as well, and their declarations show that they clearly grasped God’s promises to their people. This is exactly what Jesus was discussing with the teachers in the Temple—asking them questions, listening to their answers, and offering his own insights. And all were astonished not only at his questions but also at his deep hunger to know.

1.3. In the end, Joseph and Mary found their son, and he obediently returned home with them. Luke again emphasizes: “he kept increasing.” This refers not only to his physical growth but also to his spiritual development—as he grew older, he also grew in God’s wisdom.

WHO’S THE REAL BOSS?

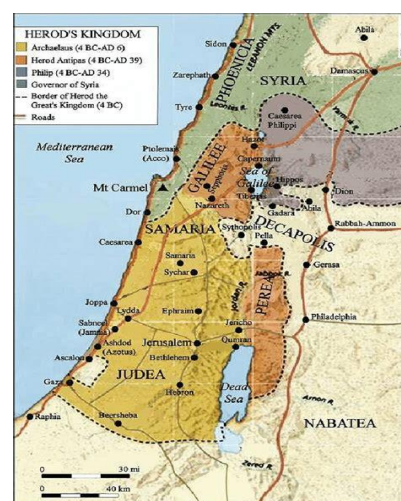
2. (Luke 3:1–2) “Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.”

2.1. Luke wants us to see clearly when all of this takes place, and who the rulers of the Roman Empire were (those ruling over Israel at that time). What may seem confusing is that Luke mentions two high priests. Historians note that during this period there were only a handful of aristocratic families in Israel who held a monopoly over the high priesthood. In practice, Rome gave the official title to whoever paid the highest price, but the real power often remained in the hands of a few individuals. Annas belonged to one of these powerful families, and after his own formal appointment as high priest, his sons and eventually his son-in-law Caiaphas took over the role.

At the time of Jesus’ crucifixion, Caiaphas was the official high priest, but notice that Jesus was first taken to Annas for questioning¹. Why? Because Annas was the true “boss,” the one who held the real influence—the source of authority without whose approval nothing significant could be decided. This is precisely why Luke mentions both Caiaphas and Annas.

Who Ruled Where:

- *Galilee – under the rule of Herod Antipas (where Jesus grew up, Nazareth).*
- *Perea – also under Herod Antipas.*
- *Ituraea and Trachonitis – under the rule of Philip (Herod’s brother).*
- *Abilene – under the rule of Lysanias.*
- *Judea and Samaria – directly under Rome, with a prefect (in Jesus’ time this was Pontius Pilate).*
- *Jerusalem – the center of religious power, under the authority of the high priests (Annas and Caiaphas).*



¹ John 18:13.24

2.2. “The word of God came to John the Baptist in the wilderness.” Just as with the prophets of the Old Testament, John was separated from the people. That separation was not accidental—God sets His prophets apart in order to give them clear instructions about what they are to proclaim. John the Baptist, the final prophet of the Old Covenant, carried that same calling: to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah.

JOHN IS AS WISE AS A SERPENT AND INNOCENT AS A DOVE

3. (Luke 3:3) “And he came into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

3.1. What is happening here? Why is John the Baptist calling his own people to wash in water and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins? As I’ve said in all the sermons so far—Israel as a nation never fulfilled the terms of the covenant they had made with God. They never loved Him with all their heart, they never fully obeyed His laws, and they never truly acknowledged who they were before Him: sinful and rebellious beings who, throughout their history, kept running from their own God. John now uses their own knowledge of Scripture and tells them that, as a nation, they must be washed from their sins.

3.2. What does this mean? Historically, if a Gentile (a non-Jew) wanted to become a Jew, he had to undergo several ceremonial rites: circumcision, the offering of a sacrifice in the Temple, and a public washing—a symbolic cleansing from his past life of rebellion against the one true God². But that was required of a Gentile, never of a Jew! Jews had their own purification rituals, but none carried the same weight, because they saw themselves as God’s chosen people—not rebellious like the “unworthy” Gentiles.

3.2.1. And now, in that culture and mindset, John stands up and proclaims: *“It is time for you to become true Jews. It is time to fulfill the terms you swore on Mount Sinai. You must, just like the Gentiles, publicly confess yourselves as a rebellious and corrupt people, and be washed from your guilt if you want to be the true people of God and behold the glory of Yahweh.”*

3.3. The meaning of John’s message was staggering. Why? Because the Jews had, throughout their history, looked at Gentiles as “second-class people.” *“Yahweh did not choose you, He chose us. You are Gentiles, you are worthless—we are the special ones.”* Such a view was deeply ingrained in their culture and passed down through generations. On top of that, Gentiles had indeed ruled over Israel

² Leviticus 15:13–15; Leviticus 17:15–16; Numbers 19:13–19; Zechariah 13:1. In the Law we read that even foreigners (Gentiles) who lived among Israel had to undergo ritual washings and purifications just like the Israelites (for example, after a bodily discharge, after eating an animal that had died naturally, or after touching a corpse). Later, it was precisely from these regulations that the custom of the *mikveh* (a complete washing) developed for Gentiles who wished to become part of the Covenant. The prophet Zechariah foretells that one day a fountain will be opened for cleansing from sin and impurity—something that rabbinic tradition and Christian interpretation alike connect with the universal conversion of all nations.

for much of its history, oppressing and exploiting them for their own ends—so it is no surprise that the Jews also deeply hated them.

3.4. And then John the Baptist comes and boldly declares before them all: *“You are the same as the Gentiles. You are no better than they are. You, too, must be washed in water from your guilt if you wish to become true Jews—worthy to see the glory of Yahweh.”*

THE PROPHET ISAIAH AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT BEFORE THE BABYLONIAN EXILE

4. The prophet Isaiah ministered in the 8th century BC, during a period when the Jewish people were already politically divided into two kingdoms: Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south). His prophetic mission was directed primarily toward the kingdom of Judah, where he prophesied in Jerusalem during the reigns of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

4.1. Isaiah’s era was marked by the threat of foreign powers, particularly the Assyrian Empire, which in 722 BC destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and carried the ten tribes into exile. Isaiah prophesied against the moral and spiritual decay of the people, calling them to repentance and to place their trust in God rather than in political alliances with pagan nations.

4.2. His messages were both warnings of God’s judgment and promises of hope—pointing to restoration and the coming of the Messiah, most notably through the messianic prophecies that are interpreted as announcements of Christ’s coming.

4.3. After Isaiah’s time, the situation in Judah continued to deteriorate until the rise of the Babylonian Empire. In 597 BC, the first waves of Jews were deported to Babylon, and in 586 BC Jerusalem finally fell—the Temple was destroyed, and most of the population was carried into Babylonian captivity. Thus, the prophecies of judgment were fulfilled, but the promises of restoration remained as a source of encouragement for the people in exile.

LUKE QUOTES ISAIAH

5. (Luke 3:4–6) *“As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: ‘The voice of one calling out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight! Every ravine will be filled, And every mountain and hill will be lowered; The crooked will become straight, And the rough roads smooth; And all flesh will see the salvation of God.”’*

5.1. Luke cites the prophet Isaiah and wants to emphasize that John the Baptist is precisely that “voice” about whom Isaiah prophesied. But in order to understand Scripture, it is not enough to simply say: *“Yes, that’s John the Baptist.”* We need to ask how this is true, and for what time in history the statement was originally given.

5.2. (Isaiah 40:1–6) *“‘Comfort, comfort My people’, says your God. ‘Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her warfare has ended, That her guilt has been removed, That she has received*

of the Lord's hand Double for all her sins.' A voice is calling: 'Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the uneven ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.' A voice says, 'Call out.' Then he answered, 'What shall I call out?' All flesh is grass, And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.'"

5.3. Let us look at the background. To understand Isaiah's prophecy, we need to see the broader picture and the reasons why it was written.

5.4. In the time of Moses, in Deuteronomy, Moses addressed the people of Israel and said: *"If you keep God's commandments, you will be blessed; if you do not keep them, you will be cursed. If you obey, you will prosper in the land the Lord gives you; but if you rebel, that land will vomit you out³."* Not long after, Moses openly warned them: *"You will enter the Promised Land and enjoy the houses, vineyards, and fruit that God gives you. But in time you will forget the Lord. You will say: 'I achieved this myself, by my own hands I gained this wealth⁴.' You will no longer honor God, and because of this you will be exiled—and for seventy years⁵."*

5.5. And indeed, that is exactly what happened. Israel entered the Promised Land and enjoyed God's blessings. Under King David and his son Solomon, the kingdom was strong⁶, but later kings—David's descendants—were for the most part selfish and corrupt⁷. Israel slowly but surely declined, both spiritually and morally. The prophets warned them: *"Return to the Lord, or you will face the consequences⁸!"*

5.6. It was then that Isaiah stepped onto the scene and prophesied: *"Babylon is coming, and it will take you into captivity⁹."* At that time, Babylon was an insignificant power, but over time it rose to become a mighty empire.

5.7. But before that happened, God spoke to Isaiah to comfort the people, and in that tone the passage begins (**Isaiah 40:1–2**), *"Enough of the bad news. Now comfort them. Tell them their captivity will end!"*

5.8. The text then says: *"They have received double for all their sins."* This does not mean God gave them more than they deserved. No—God is just. He always gives punishment that corresponds exactly to the offense. Nothing can be hidden from Him—not even our thoughts. Isaiah is simply

³ Deuteronomy 28:1–2, 15, 63–64; Deuteronomy 30:15–18

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:10–12; Deuteronomy 8:11–14, 17–19

⁵ Jeremiah 25:11–12; 2 Chronicles 36:20–21

⁶ Joshua 21:43–45; 1 Kings 4:20–21

⁷ 2 Kings 17:7–12; 2 Kings 21:9–11

⁸ Jeremiah 3:12–13; Amos 4:6–11; Isaiah 55:6–7

⁹ Isaiah 39:5–7; Isaiah 13:19

emphasizing God's perfect justice. In other words, Isaiah is telling the people: *"You cannot hide from the Lord. He knows your thoughts, and He knows your hearts, O Israel."*

THE FUTURE OF ISRAEL AFTER BABYLON

6. If we know the history of Israel, it is clear that Yahweh was not finished with them after Babylon. Their troubles did not end there. That's why we can say Isaiah's prophecy was first and foremost given for that time—when Israel was punished through exile in Babylon. That prophecy was fulfilled.

6.1. But after that, the Jews committed even greater lawlessness. How? When God sent prophets, they persecuted and killed them. And when He finally sent His own Son—Jesus—they killed Him as well. This was Jesus' own metaphor of the vineyard and the wicked tenants¹⁰. With that act, the Jews brought upon themselves the greatest possible sin. That is why Jesus prophesied "great tribulation" that would befall them. And history confirms it: the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, medieval persecutions, crusades, the Holocaust, and antisemitism that continues to this very day. Hatred toward the Jewish people has lasted for centuries, and the world still cannot explain why.

6.2. Isaiah's prophecy was directed to their time, but the principle repeats. "Comfort my people" will find its full expression only when Jesus returns and establishes His kingdom in Jerusalem. Then Israel will finally fulfill its Covenant and truly be God's people.

6.3. To understand prophecy, we must know: each word was given for a specific time, place, people, and circumstance. We cannot simply apply them anywhere we like. Yet history repeats itself—especially in the relationship between God and His people. That's why the apostle John in Revelation once again uses the word "Babylon¹¹." He is speaking to his people, reminding them of Isaiah and of the history they knew, and declaring: *"What happened to you with Babylon in the past will happen again in the future—in a different, yet similar way."*

6.4 (**Isaiah 40:3–6**) Here Isaiah looks ahead and prophesies about a messenger who will prepare the way for the coming King. He draws on an image from the ancient world: when a king was about to travel, his builders would literally level and prepare the road. There could be no obstacles—the way had to be smooth and straight. This is a metaphor for the spiritual condition of the people: if they want the King to come, their hearts must be prepared.

6.5. This prophecy carries a condition: *"If you return to God and keep the Covenant, the King will come, and the glory of Yahweh will be revealed."* Jesus and the apostles knew Isaiah and clearly identified "the voice" as John the Baptist—the one in the wilderness calling the people: *"Repent and return to God, for the King is coming!"*

¹⁰ Matthew 21:33–41; Isaiah 5:1–7

¹¹ Revelation 14:8; Revelation 17:5; Revelation 18:2, 21

6.6. Had Israel as a nation truly repented and accepted Jesus, the kingdom could indeed have been established then. The King was among them. But in God's plan, events had to unfold exactly as they did.

6.7. John had his role—to prepare the people for the King. Did he succeed? Not fully. Individuals believed, but the nation as a whole rejected him. The condition was not met, and the glory of Yahweh was not revealed.

6.8. But history will repeat itself. In **(Malachi 4:4–6)**¹² we read that another voice (Elijah) will come again to call the people. And that will be the final time: *“Return to your God—or be destroyed.”*

¹² I believe the prophecy of Malachi has not yet been fulfilled, but it will be—during the second coming of Jesus to the earth, when He establishes God's kingdom in Jerusalem.