

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
On the Road Again: The Map  
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January 2, 2021

Daniel 2:24-45, Luke 3:1-14

I want to warn you that what I am about to show you may flood you with memories. Hopefully mostly happy memories, but there is a chance the memories are not all joy and excitement. If you are under the age of 20 you are safe.

(Bring out road map)

See what I mean? How many of you have negative memories around a map like this? But how many of you have happy memories tied to it too?

For the Gen Z members of our community, let me explain. This is a map. But not just any map, this is a road trip map. There was a time not so long ago that people all across America (dad's mostly) would unfold one of these maps, circle where they were starting their trip, circle the place they would like to go, and spend an hour or more charting the best way to get to the second circle.

The happy memories are of family time on vacation: pulling over unexpectedly at a roadside attraction no one knew about, those last few miles as the destination approached. I particularly loved driving south and slowly being able to leave my coat in the car, then my sweater, then change into shorts because pants were too much. GOOD TIMES!

The not-so-happy memories mostly deal with trying to fold this thing back up. Which looks straightforward until you actually attempt it. This is what we had before smartphones could pull a map down from a satellite so up-to-date, it alerts you when a police officer is a mile away.

I didn't understand how my dad picked the roads then, and looking at this map now, I am very thankful for my smartphone. This is a mess! It's a hairball of roads. You want to know the name of a road? Good luck! You want to know what exit to get off at? HA! My phone can tell me when to turn to the nearest foot! This? It's a miracle if the scale is accurate, let alone you can figure out how to calculate it.

Even though our technology for finding our way has improved, we still need maps. I actually think I need maps more than my parents did because I put in my friend's address who is 10 miles away every time I visit. Well...there may be construction, scratch that...there will be construction, and I want to know where the police are too.

Finding a map to help us get from one place to another is a simple thing, but there are so many other maps we probably wish we had. A parenting map, a mental health map, an apology map, a grief map. So much of life we have to stumble our way forward and endure the dead ends until we get to where we are going.

Maps set a foundation for our journey. They help us know what obstacles to expect and what signs we should look for to signal we are still going the right way. The Bible can be described as a map of sorts for our relationship with God and spiritual health. We read the stories of the obstacles God's people have had to overcome. Hopefully learning from their mistakes. We also see how God has interacted with humanity throughout time and it helps us keep our eyes open for similar ways God is trying to reach out to us.

Maps are helpful. This is why when God formulates the plan to enter our world, God sends someone to explain the map to us - John the Baptist. Now with most mapped-out plans, they are actually vague directions that give us a sense of where we are going. The details come later.

When it comes to John, the directions are indeed vague. I like to think of John as an extreme Jesus. Where Jesus travels from town to town with hardly any possessions and is not very concerned about his appearance, John is a wild man. He prefers to sleep outside. He is described as wearing dirty rudimentary clothing. John does not care how he looks.

Where Jesus tells parables that challenge the religious elite John calls them a brood of vipers. Where Jesus reminds people they are children of God, John says if you aren't going to act like God's family then we'll get a new family from these rocks. Where Jesus teaches about the fruit of the Spirit, John has an ax ready to immediately cut down any tree that is not bearing fruit. After John, Jesus looks like a walk in the park. However, even though their delivery could not be more opposite, the message is similar. Share what extra you have and live ethically, taking only what is right. John shows people the map and Jesus tells us exactly where to turn.

In Luke, we get a glimpse into the work John did to get us acquainted with the map. With any good journey, knowing where you are starting is very important. Luke lets us know where we are in six different ways. First, we know we are in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Tiberius became emperor in 14 CE so the 15<sup>th</sup> year is 28 or 29 CE.

Then, we have three dates that let us know where in the political organization of Palestine we are. We posit Herod the Great because there is a division in the kingdom. Herod Antipas is in Galilee, Herod Philip rules in Ituraea, and Archelaus in Judea. Note Herod is a popular name, but Jesus' interactions are with Herod Antipas in whose reign Jesus lives his whole life.

The fourth way Luke tells us our starting point is by mentioning Lysanias, who unfortunately we know practically nothing about. So it's a good thing Luke obsesses over dating this starting point or else we would have no clue based on this date alone.

Finally, Luke lets us know where we are starting on the religious map. He tells us two names Annas and Caiaphas are said to be high priests. BUT there never were two high priests serving at the same time. The high priest was the civil and religious head of the community. Traditionally the high priest was passed down through a family and they served for life. But when the Romans came onto the scene there was a lot of turmoil around this seat of power. If we look at the first date 28-29 CE we can determine that Annas was out of power. There was pressure to replace him from the Romans and three of his sons sat in the role before Caiaphas, his son-in-law, took on the role. What Luke is telling us by mentioning both people is that Caiaphas is technically in the seat, but Annas still has a heavy influence behind the scenes. In the eyes of the people, Annas was still the rightful high priest; Caiaphas was just there to interface with Rome.

This is where we begin. The political landscape is divided and struggling to know who has what power. The religious leadership is not entirely transparent. We have to go all the way to the top, to Tiberius as Caesar, to find anyone with complete power, but even he must be worried that the structure under him is crumbling. This is why when people start calling Jesus a king or a high priest they are pressing a lot of dangerous buttons.

Once we know where we are, we need to circle where we are going. John is very clear that the destination is Jesus. Everything John does is to set Jesus up for success. John prepares the people to be able to hear Jesus' message as clearly as they can. This may be why John is so abrasive with his delivery. John throws these truths in people's faces and uses harsh language as a way to make Jesus' softer approach a relief.

Because if we are honest what Jesus teaches is hard and shocking. But after hearing John's antics, flipping tables in the temple seems reasonable.