

Malachi 3: 1 - 4  
Luke 1: 68 - 79  
Philippians 1: 3 - 11  
Luke 3: 1 - 6

### **Notes on the Old Testament Lesson**

Jewish tradition holds to this day that Elijah will return to herald the coming of the Messiah. He is the “messenger to prepare the way”. Jesus told the disciples that Elijah had come in the person of John the Baptist (Matthew 17:10 - 13).

The “day of his coming” refers to the Day of the Lord that is discussed in several of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures; most notably Joel (see the second chapter) although the fourth chapter of Malachi also refers to it. Interestingly, in the second chapter of Acts, Peter links the Day of the Lord not to the coming of the Messiah, but to the founding of the church on the day of Pentecost.

Fullers soap is an agent for bleaching wool. There was an area west of Jerusalem known as the Fuller’s Field where this soap is believed to have been prepared.

The reference to the descendants of Levi who need to be purified refers to the priests. The passage makes it plain that the priests did not serve in righteousness. Only after they were purified and refined would their offerings be pleasing to the Lord.

### **Notes on the Psalter Lesson**

The Psalter Lesson for this week comes from the Gospel of Luke. This prophecy of Zechariah is the first utterance by the father of John the Baptist after he was made mute for not believing the prophecy of his son’s birth. This passage is the second of four “songs” that appear in the first two chapters of Luke’s Gospel.

### **Notes on the Epistle Lesson**

Letters of today have a common pattern: date, heading, greeting, body, closing, and signature. Thousands of letters from the first century have been found and these also had a pattern that was almost universally used. There would first be a Salutation that would identify the sender, the recipient, and give a greeting. The next section was the Thanksgiving, where the sender would state his gratitude for the recipient and for their relationship. This was followed by the Body of the letter and then would come Closing Commands. The final section was the Conclusion which included a Peace Wish, Greetings to others, a verbal Kiss, and finally a Closing.

All of Paul's letters follow this pattern. (The exception is Galatians where, because of Paul's anger at the Galatian churches, he omits the Thanksgiving and instead expresses his astonishment at their apostasy.) This week's passage from Philippians is the Thanksgiving portion of Paul's letter to this church.

### **Notes on the Gospel Lesson**

This is one of the few places in the New Testament where an event is stated in relationship to a known historical event. Augustus died in August of A.D. 14. Thus, John's ministry most likely began in or near A.D. 28.

The Herod referred to in the first verse of today's passage is Herod Antipas, one of the three surviving sons of Herod the Great. At the death of Herod the Great, his kingdom was divided among these three sons, one of whom is the Philip also mentioned in this verse. Note that both Caiaphas and Annas are listed as High Priest. Caiaphas held the office, to which he was appointed by the Roman governor, but his father-in-law, Annas, who had been removed from that position by Pilate, was still very much the controlling authority or the power behind the throne.

The region around the Jordan in verse 3 refers to the Jordan River Valley which extends from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Dead Sea in the south.

Almost all of our modern Bibles construct the quote from Isaiah (verses 4 - 6) differently in Luke than they do in Isaiah itself. (Written Hebrew has no punctuation which causes this confusion.) In Isaiah, the text reads: The voice of one crying out, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord" instead of a voice that cries out in the Wilderness. Also, the second half of Isaiah's statement, "make straight in the desert a highway for our God", is omitted in the gospels. The Wilderness referred to in both Isaiah and the gospels is not simply a deserted area. It is a specific geographic designation for the area that runs south from Jericho along the Dead Sea and to the Mount of Olives to the west.