

Sunday Jan. 3, 2021
Lesson 5: John Calls for Repentance
Scripture: Luke 3: 1-18

Context:

Our series continues to focus on God's hope for humanity. For the season of Epiphany, we will look at "The Good News" found in scripture and the hope God gives us as found in God's Word. Each week we will explore how the good news gives hope for us today.

The scripture passage for this week comes from the gospel of Luke. Because the gospel writer likes details, we begin with the timeline context of John's ministry. The importance of these figures is the role they will play in the political dynamics of Christ's story. There is of course Caesar, Pontius Pilate, three kings of the tetrarchy including Herod the Great, and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas.¹ The setting emphasizes how Luke's universality is not geographical, but is also social, political, and economic.² The setting points to us how the story of Christ and John the Baptist has worldly implications.

The setting of John's ministry is not greatly explored. All we know is he receives the call to preach while in the wilderness and then begins his ministry in the region alongside the Jordan River. His main gifts were baptizing people and preaching the good news. John's baptism was joined to repentance and therefore was not a proselyte baptism, which seems to have been practiced by some synagogues when receiving non-Jews.³ The Qumran sect also practiced baptism and yet theirs was a repeated act of cleansing.⁴ For John, the baptism was a way of preparing the people for the coming of the Lord.

John's ministry was about the prophets of old resurfacing to tell of the good news. Even his words reference back to the words of Isaiah, who speaks of a voice crying out to the wilderness about what is to come. The words of John link the Old Testament to the New Testament, and the story of our Lord is interwoven together.

The next words in the text are John's message to those who gather to hear his message. John does not hold back as he calls them a brood of snakes and reminds them of how no one can maintain an illusion of innocence. Only life and deeds will enable anyone to escape the fate of fruitless trees.⁵ Thus, John calls for them to live life anew. The tax collectors are to stop taxing more than they should. Those with abundance are called to share with others. Soldiers are told to treat others with respect and not abuse power.

All are called to prepare for the one coming. He appeals to them to not become

¹ Craddock, Fred B. "Luke," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 46.

² *Ibid.*, 47.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

empty husks; instead they are to be wheat, which nurtures others. And John continues to preach to them telling them of the good news to come.

Application

John the Baptist always appears around Advent and then sticks around to kick off the season of Epiphany. He is the prophet we know and love as the cousin of Jesus, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the hippy preacher content to capture our imaginations. He is found on the banks of the Jordan River and every year he comes to get in our space, step on our toes, and wash us clean.

Perhaps the reason churches rejoice at the annual appearance of John is because deep down, we crave for some good news to come our way and John is the prophet for us. We look for hope, the coming of the Messiah, and we want to see light in the darkness. During Daylight Savings time we especially search for the places light can reveal things to us. John stands at the banks of the river urging us to jump in and get ready; the Lord is coming.

Of particular note in this passage is how John knows how to speak to each group who clamor around him. No one is spared the message of how repentance and good works are to be a part of their life. All are called to see how their lives are to be fruitful or pruned.

I always wonder what John the Baptist would say if he showed up to us today. I imagine he would have a word to us all. In the secular world, I imagine it would go something like this to employers: "What's wrong with you? Pay your employees and treat them fairly. Remember how you were once in their position." To the employee: "Stop clocking in when you aren't there and start taking responsibility for your area." And for each sector of common life, I imagine John would have some words of wisdom.

Much like he had a word for the religious people of his time, I imagine John would have something to say to us today. To clergy, he might say: "Do the right thing. Don't people please; you'll pay for it later. Preach the gospel and lead the people. Stop complaining about how your vocation is harder than everyone else's. Don't you know I've given you the gifts to lead well?" To the laity, he might say: "Don't blame the preacher or the DS or the Bishop for your numbers or your woes. What have you done in your community? Who have you invited to church? Be a witness and serve the world." I think all of us might have our toes stepped upon by John the Baptist.

If he does anything well, John is a great encourager to those around him. He knows God has done a good work in the people of God and will continue to do so. They have the gifts, the skills, and the imagination. God is all about building up the body of Christ.

Yet for whatever reason, we tend to run from God as fast as we can. We would rather someone else do the hard work of being a witness to the world. The idea of the status quo has worked for so long, why can it not work right now? We run as hard as we can until we get to the Jordan River.

And there as we sit at the banks stewing over whatever mess we've found ourselves in, we see a figure who comes up to remind us of how we are called. He's a wild looking figure and yet he is captivating. He reminds us of the good news he has wanted us to realize all along. We have a new life in Christ and he has already been hovering around us for a while. Now why don't we come into the water and feel the cool

splash on our head and feel the cleansing over our bodies. God is calling us to new life and has claimed us by name.

Why do you think John the Baptist captivates us? What good news do you think John the Baptist would want to share with us today? What words do you think John would have for you about repentance and bearing fruit? How can you remember your baptism and the claim God has made on your life?

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