

Sermon for Dec 5 2021  
"Hard-talkin' John"

Gospel text: Luke 3:1-20

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

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Along came John... Hard talkin' John.

Luke tells us that John was in the wilderness, baptizing repentant sinners. The whole idea of baptizing sinners was something new, something novel. Prior to this, the idea of setting something apart from the ordinary for use in God's service was a baptism of objects, not

people. But John was moved by God's word to provide a Baptism of Repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He was doing this work out in the wilderness. And the people were coming to him for this service. This was bothering the Pharisees, who saw no purpose in this strange new thing. In fact, that was the reason they were there, in the desert. They had come to observe, to see for themselves what John was up to... what he was doing, what he was saying... and why.

It's the kind of self-appointed vigilantism the Pharisees were known for; they confront Jesus the same way, demanding that he answer for himself...

"By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"

And Jesus uses this very example from John, to make his own point...

Jesus replied, "Let me first ask you one question, and if you will answer it, then I will answer your question... I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?"

Now they are frustrated... they discussed it among themselves saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all believe John is a prophet." They answered, "We don't know."

Then Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

Clearly this work that John is doing in the wilderness is God's work... preparing the way of the Lord.

John spoke thus to the crowds, although it is primarily the Pharisees that he is addressing...

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Like I said... Hard talkin' John.

There is something in a contrast of manner and style between Jesus and John. There is an edge to John. Although, Jesus could have an edge too. In general I think we have the image of Jesus as being more soft spoken. Jesus himself describes the difference this way.

It was after John had been arrested and put in jail for speaking the truth about Herod's marriage. The kingdom of Judah was under Roman occupation, but it was still ruled more or less by a puppet government of three Herodian kings (Tetrarchs) -- Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip. They were Jewish by birth, but culturally they were Greek. If you are curious as to how the relationship worked between Herodian king Herod-Antipas and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, you might picture the relationship between the queen of England and the prime minister, if the queen were also the vassal of Caesar.

Herod was King of Judea in Jerusalem, his brother Philip was king of the lands bordering the Galilee. While visiting Rome, Herod had an affair with Herodias, Philip's wife. After which Herod divorces his own wife, and Herodias divorces Philip and they marry each other. The Law of Moses does not allow for this situation and John, as God's prophet, publicly condemns the affair....resulting in his incarceration, which under the law was also NOT legal for Herod to do. Arresting your political enemies and throwing them in jail is clearly nothing new. As the saying goes... the more things change, the more they remain the same.

John falls into a pit of despair, I suppose, as I believe he honestly expected Jesus to take up his cause. But Jesus doesn't seem to take notice of the politics of the day. And alone in a gloomy place, under threat, with word of his fate... I think John's mind goes to a dark place.

That's a problem, often, when we can't get answers and we are left on our own to speculate our fate... We tend to play out the worst case scenarios. Some are not willing to concede that John could have had doubts about Jesus during this time. They want to say that it was his *disciples* who doubted and so John sent his disciples to see Jesus for assurance. But I think that we can find plenty of examples where even the prophets experienced times of doubts and depression. I've never been too afraid of having doubts, because in some sense, doubting confirms that you believe in the first place. That you HAVE enough faith to doubt.

I heard a phrase the other day that I found helpful and encouraging...

"It is better to live in a world with questions that cannot be answered than it is to live in a world with answers that cannot be questioned."

From his cell in prison, John asks Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus replies, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

Jesus reminds John what the coming kingdom is all about, and it is *not* about politics.

John is a prophet, and therefore John is a messenger of the Gospel. But John is the last of the Old Testament prophets. And John is still looking for righteousness in this world. Judgement on this world is what John is expecting. That day is coming. In the meanwhile there must be the proclamation of grace. Repent... YES. But return also to the Lord. This is the song they both sing.

Jesus says to his critics..."What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? (That's not John) If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? (That's not John either) No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written:

'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

"Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John... That's all finished. The work is done, Jesus says; I have come.

The irony is, for those who missed the signs....

"We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance;  
we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn."

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her deeds."

In other words, Jesus says...

When we sang the happy song... the song of redemption... you didn't feel the joy... get happy feet.

When we sang the sad song, the song of judgement... you didn't feel the sorrow... or cry your eyes out.

HOT or COLD... what will MOVE YOUR lukewarm hearts?

John came... stern and foreboding... AUSTERE and STOIC... You write him off as a dangerous kook. A nutjob to be cast out.

Jesus came... gentle and welcoming... open and Epicurean... You write him off as a meaningless flake to be ignored and avoided.

Perhaps there is no pleasing you.

You don't want a messenger who is bold and courageous

You don't want a messenger who is gentle and assuring. Perhaps it's not the messenger; perhaps it's the *message* you don't like?

John has a special role to play. His job was to point to the Christ... there he is...

the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John's role is problematic...

He is, for lack of a better term, the herald of change. And maybe that's the unwelcome message.

THINGS CHANGE. Here, in this world... And change can be welcome or not...

But what if it's YOU that needs to change?

John is here at the beginning of Advent as one of those reminders that we are to prepare the royal highway... And that preparation BEGINS HERE (the heart) and HERE (the head).